

Is Our Bible Complete? #2

Introduction. Regarding our Presidents, the media loves to discuss legacy. How will the future remember a particular President? What will historians say about him? What makes a President great? Is greatness determined by the writings of famous historians, or does greatness come with the deeds done? Are not historians merely recorders of what has happened and what was believed? Was not Abraham Lincoln considered a great President because of what he did and his popularity? The historians did not make him great. They recorded his greatness.

Transferring this line of reasoning to our discussion, the question arises, "How were the books of the Bible selected? Who made the decision that Galatians is in our Bible and the Epistle of Barnabas is not?" What people expect is to hear that Origen, Jerome, or Augustine, or a "church council" set the canon of the scriptures. But the problem with this reasoning is the same as the reasoning that makes a President great. Is a book in our canon because someone said it was to be in there, or did these men and others simply record what was already a known fact?

I. ***Early Christians Were Aware Of Counterfeits***

- A. They knew that counterfeit letters could come along and draw them away from the faith (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).
 - 1. Many deceivers wrote false gospels and letters, pretending that they were written by the apostles.
 - 2. The early church leaders dismissed them as counterfeit and unreliable. The false gospels and letters betrayed themselves by their late date of composition and by their teaching, which clearly conflicted with the canonical books and the accepted doctrines of the churches.
- B. People talk about lost books, but that is really an impossible position! There are only two ways to view Bible.
 - 1. The first way is to consider that if it is from God, then He supernaturally oversaw its production (Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 24:35; 1 Peter 1:25).
 - a) It is clear that God was and is determined that His word will not be destroyed. Regardless of the actions men may take, God's word will stand.
 - b) If it is from God, how could God lose His own book? Someone might respond, "But man wrote it." Can God oversee the production of His word? God can sustain the world and make a donkey speak (Colossians 1:17; Numbers 22:28)!

2. The second way is to consider that if it is not from God, then it is from man, making it a purely natural production, which is the world's view.
 - a) If from man, who oversaw it? Early church leaders.
 - b) If they decide to throw out inspired books and choose books that represent their beliefs, discarded books are not lost!
 - (1) If somebody finds it 2,000 years and says it is a lost book of the Bible, we ask, "What makes it a lost book?" It may be old, and a great archeological find, but it is not a lost book. If it was never in Bible, it could not be lost!
 - (2) Suppose you write a book stating your personal beliefs from notes that you collected for years. Someone rummages through your trash and finds other beliefs that you did not include in your book and claims these are your lost beliefs. Wrong! They are not my beliefs; that is why they are in trash. If they were mine, they would be in the book!
 - (3) Critics think it strengthens their case to say, "But early disciples threw out these lost books." Actually, it proves these books were not accepted because they did not agree with inspired scripture.

II. ***The Needs Of Early Christians***

- A. The churches needed to know which books should be read, revered, and applied to their varied and often precarious situations in a hostile social and religious environment.
- B. They had many problems to address, and they needed assurance regarding which books would serve as their source of authority.
 1. They were prophetic. Norman Geisler said, "The initial reason for collecting and preserving the inspired books was that they were prophetic. That is, since they were written by an apostle or prophet of God, they must be valuable, and if valuable, they should be preserved. This reasoning is apparent in apostolic times, by the collection and circulation of Paul's epistles (cf. 2 Peter 3:15-16; Colossians 4:16)."
 2. The rise of heretics.
 - a) As early as A.D. 140, the heretic Marcion developed his own incomplete canon and began to propagate it.
 - (1) Marcion believed that the God of the Old Testament was an evil creator God that Jesus came to destroy. Marcion, therefore, only accepted the gospel of Luke and the writings of Paul, cutting out all quotations to the Old Testament. In the midst of this heresy, congregations needed to counter his

influence by collecting all the books of New Testament scripture.

- (2) It is obvious that a collection of Paul's epistles existed at the time for Marcion to pick apart. This is a sign of a "pre-canon," or the idea of a canon, quite some time before the fourth century, even if it was not a complete canon. It is wrong, however, to talk or write as if the church first began to draw up a canon after the publication of Marcion's.
- b) Early heresies initiated by the Gnostics and others required that faithful brethren make a defense of the inspired writings.
 - (1) Several Gnostic gospels were discovered in 1945 in Nag Hamadi, Egypt. Where the Nag Hammadi texts real gospels? No, for they are easily identifiable as Gnostic literature which did not belong in the scriptures.
 - (2) The Gnostics were people who mixed Greek philosophy and the New Testament and developed a religion unsuitable to either. On the Christian end, they were roundly condemned even in the New Testament on account of their denial that Jesus was really a man, that He really died, and that the God of the Old Testament is the one true God (John 1:1-18; 2 Timothy 2:16-18; 1 John 1:1; 4:2-3; 2 John 7). Both Paul and John teach against the ideas that the resurrection was past and that Jesus was not born in the flesh, both concepts present in Gnosticism and featured in the various gospels and writings attributed to them. We can see why, then, the Gnostic writings were rejected. They deserved to be rejected!
 - (3) In the process of defending the New Testament books, they actually insured that we would have historical verification of the writings that were known to be produced by inspired men.
- c) Tertullian (A.D. 160-220) was a heretic in the early church, but like most false teachers used the scriptures to bolster his position. He wrote, "The same authority of the apostolic churches will afford evidence to the other Gospels also, which we possess equally through their means, and according to their usage (I mean the Gospels of John and Matthew) whilst that which Mark had published may be affirmed to be Peter's, whose interpreter Mark was. For even Luke's form of the Gospel men usually ascribe to Paul. And it may well seem that the words which disciples publish belong to their masters."

3. The circulation of spurious writings. Many Eastern churches used books in services that were definitely counterfeit. This called for a decision concerning the canon.
4. Preaching in other countries. Norman Geisler said, "Christianity had spread rapidly to other countries, and there was the need to translate the Bible into those other languages ... As early as the first half of the second century the Bible was translated into Syriac and Old Latin. But because the missionaries could not translate a Bible that did not exist, attention was necessarily drawn to the question of which books really belonged to the authoritative Christian canon."
5. Christian persecution.
 - a) The edict of Diocletian (A.D. 303) called for the destruction of all the sacred books of the Christians. It is clear by the edict that there was already a set of books recognized as the inspired scriptures. These books were so well-defined that even outsiders would know what the books consisted of and would burn the books and persecute those who had them in their possession.
 - b) Who would die for a book that was religious in tone, but not inspired? The writings that Christians died to protect are listed in the third and fourth centuries as the same writings we have today in our New Testaments.

III. ***The New Testament Canon***

A. The New Testament Apocrypha.

1. The Old Testament Apocrypha is usually thought of when one mentions Apocryphal books. However, there are others, many of which are known as the New Testament Apocrypha. These were referenced in *The Da Vinci Code*.
2. The New Testament Apocrypha includes a variety of literary types: gospels, acts, and epistles. They were written under the assumed names of the apostles and others after the first century. They contain fanciful stories about Jesus and the apostles. The Apocryphal gospels often deal with the early years of Jesus and portray Him as a temperamental child, causing the death of some of His playmates. The Apocryphal acts and others indulge in similar nonsense. The following is a partial list (there are reportedly dozens of Apocryphal books).
 - a) The Epistle of Barnabas.
 - b) Didache or the Teaching of the Twelve.
 - c) Acts of Paul and Thecla.
 - d) Acts of Matthias.
 - e) The Epistle to the Laodiceans.
 - f) The Gospel According to the Hebrews.

- g) The Gospel of Peter.
 - h) The Gospel of Thomas.
 - i) The Infancy Gospel of Thomas.
 - j) Protoevangelion of James.
 - k) The Gospel of Mary Magdalene.
 - l) The Dialogue of the Savior.
 - m) The Gospel of Judas.
 - n) The Gospel of Nicodemus.
 - o) The Seven Epistles of Ignatius.
 - p) History of Joseph the Carpenter.
 - q) The Gospel of Bartholomew.
3. Just like in the Old Testament period, there was also New Testament apocalyptic literature. These works included the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Apocalypse of Paul, and the Apocalypse of Stephen.
- B. Churches collected the New Testament books, viewing them as much a part of God's word as the Old Testament.
1. The New Testament books were for congregational use (Colossians 4:16), and for individual use (Luke 1:1-4). Furthermore, they were for use in different provinces (Galatians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1), and everywhere (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:27).
 2. When the inspired men of the first century wrote, the product of their work was immediately acknowledged and accepted by those in the church. They "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42) and they received those teachings "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). These writings were "scripture" before the ink had dried.
 - a) The word "scripture" is used 31 times in the New Testament and always refers to the written record of the will of God. Thus, "scripture" can be accurately applied to what is found in both the Old and New Testaments.
 - b) Paul quotes Luke's gospel and calls it scripture (1 Timothy 5:18; cf. Luke 10:7). Peter mentions Paul's writings and calls them scripture (2 Peter 3:16).
 3. Standards for inclusion in New Testament canon.
 - a) Is it authoritative?
 - (1) God gives a book its divine authority, not the people of God (cf. Mark 1:22). The New Testament writers had to be apostles, followers of apostles, or at least eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1-2). The writers of the New Testament wrote by inspiration (1 Corinthians 11:23; 14:37). The words they

penned were given by the direct revelation of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). He told them what to say and how to say it (1 Corinthians 2:13).

- (2) The persons most qualified to write about a great teacher or leader, whether it be Jesus, Martin Luther King, or Gandhi, are: a) family (as with James and Jude, who by virtue of their association with Jesus and decision to follow Him became de facto apostles); b) immediate followers (the apostles); or, c) immediate followers of those followers (Mark and Peter, Luke and Paul).
- b) Is it prophetic?
- (1) "If it was written by a spokesman for God, then it was the Word of God" (Norman Geisler).
 - (a) Miracles frequently separated the true prophets from the false ones in the Old Testament (Exodus 4:1-9; 1 Kings 18:38).
 - (b) The New Testament had the same method of confirmation (Acts 2:22; 2 Corinthians 12:12).
 - (2) From the early second century onward, Paul's letters were circulated as an inspired collection in descending order of length (Galatians 1:11-12; cf. 2 Peter 3:15-16).
- c) Is it authentic?
- (1) An epistle of Paul could be identified by the way in which it was written (2 Thessalonians 3:17; Galatians 6:11).
 - (2) Letters were sent by known associates of Paul or the church (2 Corinthians 7:5-10, 14; Ephesians 6:21-22; Colossians 4:7-9).
 - (3) A book cannot contradict truth and be God's; it must conform to the "rule of faith" (Galatians 6:16). Because of this, the "church fathers" maintained the policy, "If in doubt, throw it out." This enhanced the validity of their discernment of the canonical books.
 - (4) The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas is dated to about A.D. 200 and is a collection of 114 supposed sayings of Jesus. Several passages definitively prove that it was not inspired.
 - (a) Some slightly modify His words. 100: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, render to God the things that are God's, render to me the things that are mine."
 - (b) Others make no sense. 2: "Jesus said: He who seeks must not stop seeking until he finds; and when he finds, he will be bewildered; and if he is bewildered, he will marvel, and will be king over the All."

- (c) Others simply contradict New Testament teaching.
 - i) 108: "Jesus said: He who drinks from my mouth will become as I am, and I myself will become he. And the things that are hidden shall be revealed to him."
 - ii) 77: "... Split the wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."
 - iii) 114: "Simon Peter said to them: Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life. Jesus said: Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven."
- d) Does it come with the power of God?
 - (1) Christians knew that the "living and active" word of God had the power to change people's lives (Hebrews 4:12). This power was a strong indication that a given book had God's "stamp of approval" (2 Timothy 3:16).
 - (2) "In opting for the canon, the church seemed to say that the criteria of truth lay outside herself in a text that stood over her and at times even against her. By accepting the norm of Scripture, the church declared that there was a standard outside herself to which she intended to be subject for all time ... The church can fall into error and needs the Bible to measure herself by. In turn, the church serves the canon by continuing in the truth and faithfully proclaiming the Word of God" (Clark Pinnock).
- e) Was it accepted by the people of God?
 - (1) "But what's remarkable is that even though the fringes of the canon remained unsettled for a while, there was actually a high degree of unanimity concerning the greater part of the New Testament within the first two centuries. And this was true among very diverse congregations scattered over a wide area (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). It was, if I may put it this way, an example of 'survival of the fittest'" (Bruce Metzger).
 - (2) "For whatever subsequent debate there may have been about a books place in the canon, the people in the best position to know its prophetic credentials were those who knew the prophet who wrote it. Hence, despite all later debate about the canonicity of some books, the definitive evidence is that which attests to its original acceptance by the contemporary believers" (Norman Geisler).

- (3) First century Christians knew that the Bible was the faith "once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3; cf. Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10).
- f) Does it have apostolic approval?
- (1) Some mistakenly think that the only books which deserve to be in the Bible are the ones authored by apostles. But people in the first few centuries understood that there were men other than the apostles who were inspired. For example, Jude 18 refers to 2 Peter 3:3, establishing the authority of Jude.
 - (2) When we reach the end, every book of the New Testament is either written by an apostle or by someone closely associated with an apostle. Even the books where we are not certain of the identity of the author today, still can be associated with an apostle.
 - (3) However, Apocryphal writings do not come close to bearing the marks of true inspiration and apostolic authority as do our New Testament books.
- g) What is the testimony of early writers regarding the book?
- (1) Some argue that there was a gradual evolving of thought concerning the scripture -- that only after a long period did these writings come to be regarded as authoritative. That is not true. There was a gradual process of distributing these writings around the world (Colossians 4:16).
 - (2) Ultimately these works were compiled into one book. There is some evidence that New Testament compilations began as early as A.D. 115 -- perhaps only a few years after the death of the last apostle. But the actual writings were regarded as scripture immediately.
 - (3) There were several appeals to the authority of what we now know as the New Testament books. Their views demonstrate the authenticity of the books.
 - (a) Clement of Rome, in his *Epistles to the Corinthians* (A.D. 95) makes reference to eight different New Testament books.
 - (b) Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) made extensive appeals to the four gospels and mentions Acts and Revelation. He adds in his *Dialogue with Trypho* the formula "It is written" when he quotes from the gospels. Both he and Trypho must have known to what "It is written" referred, and that this introduction designated that the scripture is inspired.

- (c) The epistles of Ignatius (A.D. 115) and Polycarp (A.D. 130) refer to various New Testament books. The Old and New Testament books were referred to with the phrase "as it is said in these scriptures." Ignatius wrote, "I do not wish to command you as Peter and Paul; they were apostles."
 - (d) Irenaeus (A.D. 180) attests to the canonical recognition of virtually the entire New Testament. F. F. Bruce said, "It is evident that by A.D. 180 the idea of the fourfold gospel had become so axiomatic throughout Christendom that it could be referred to as an established fact as obvious and inevitable and natural as the four cardinal points of the compass (as we call them) or the four winds."
 - (e) Origen (A.D. 185-254) mentions most books of the New Testament by name, stating that a few were disputed by some.
 - (f) Eusebius (A.D. 265-340) mentions all as acknowledged except James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2-3 John. He would have liked to reject Revelation because he thought it taught millenarianism, but he could not.
 - (g) Athanasius (A.D. 367) gave us the earliest list of New Testament books that are exactly like our present New Testament. Shortly after Athanasius circulated his list, Jerome and Augustine followed suit, defining the New Testament canon of 27 books.
- (4) Up to the year A.D. 180, all our New Testament books (with the exception of 2 Peter) are found in either direct quotations or allusions in the writings of the leaders of the churches. By this year, a few churches hesitated over James, Jude, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation; but all the rest were universally accepted. The church leaders never used noncanonical books with the same authority as the New Testament books.
4. The first ecclesiastical councils to classify the canonical books were both held in North Africa -- at Hippo Regius in A.D. 393 and at Carthage in A.D. 397.
- a) Questions about the canon of scripture were already settled long before a "church council." No "council" conferred any authority upon these books that they did not already possess. The "council" only confirmed what was already known to be true: the books were accepted by early Christians and churches that knew the apostles and prophets who actually wrote the books.

- (1) The books that finally were canonized were those that enjoyed a special status and were utilized both frequently and universally by the church, recognizing their innate worth and divine inspiration.
 - (2) Actually, scholarly attacks against the New Testament canon have always been in regard to the books that are included, not excluded. It is hard to find a scholar who says more books should be added to the New Testament.
- b) "The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the church included them as divinely inspired, recognizing their innate worth and generally apostolic authority, direct or indirect ... What these councils did was not to impose something new upon the Christian communities, but to codify what was already the general practice of those communities" (F. F. Bruce).
5. Why the Apocryphal books are rejected.
- a) None of them enjoyed any more than a temporary or local recognition.
 - b) Most of them never did have anything more than a semi-canonical status, being appended to various manuscripts or mentioned in tables of contents.
 - c) No major "church council" included them as inspired New Testament books.
 - d) The limited acceptance enjoyed by a lot of these books is attributable to the fact that they attached themselves to references in canonical books (e.g., Epistle to the Laodiceans to Colossians 4:16), or because of their alleged apostolic authorship (e.g., Acts of Paul).

Conclusion. David Dockery wrote, "No Christian, confident in the providential working of his God and informed about the true nature of the canonicity of His word, should be disturbed about the dependability of the Bible we now possess." These "missing" books were never really missing; we knew of their existence because the early Christians who opposed them would write about their beliefs and the books they were opposing.

The Apocryphal books are not in the Bible because they have no right to be in the Bible. They were not written by inspired men, the majority of them were written by people who were trying to advance views contrary to those found in the New Testament, and they were rejected on the basis of sound deliberation, often as soon as they were written. Let us not be disturbed in our faith because of these books. We can be confident in the truth of the Bible.

No one determined the canon. The Catholic church, contrary to their claims, did not determine nor protect the canon. In fact, they have added books which are clearly not inspired. Christians did not suppress certain books because they were undesirable.

The point of the Bible was not to record all things but to record what was sufficient. It is sad that people are often looking to add books or materials at the level of scripture, and yet few have ever really read and understood what is already written in the 66 books of the Bible.