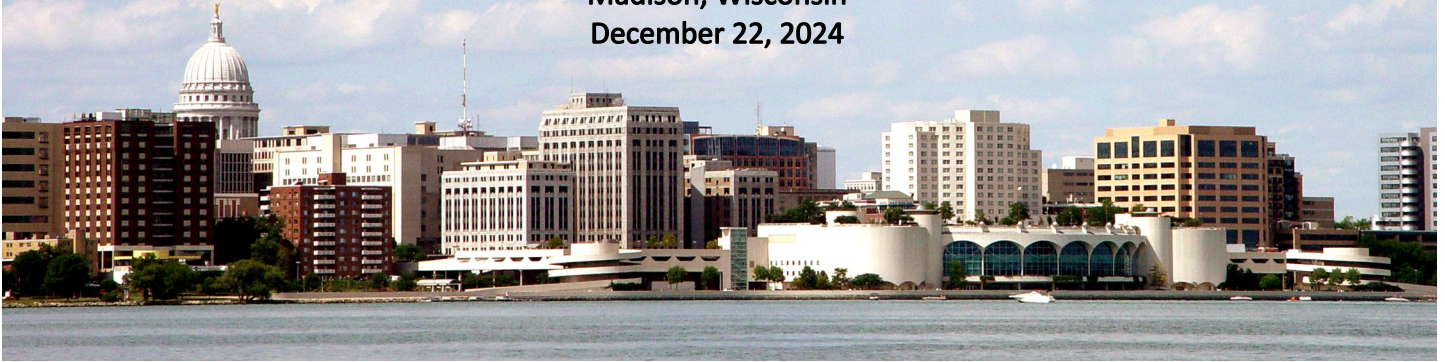


The Canon of Scripture

How We Got the Bible: Part 5

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Good morning and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting with us today, we are happy to have you with us, and we'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card – either online or on a card from the pew in front of you. And we also invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns in that way.

We are here this morning to preach the good news that God loves us and sent his Son Jesus to save us: He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up from the dead on the first day of the week. We respond to this good news by turning to God in faith, by turning away from sin, by publicly proclaiming our faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. And, as usual, we do have several examples to share this week, starting with an update from the Millington Church of Christ, which is just north of Memphis, I believe. They posted this week, and they say that, "Porky Clark was baptized tonight!! Angels are rejoicing in heaven and so are we!!" This is one of the happiest people I've seen all week.

This next one also comes to us from the Warner Robbins congregation down in Georgia. They say that, "The angels in heaven are praising God tonight as we welcome our sister in Christ, Joyce Wilson. Let us all say Amen and welcome Sister Joyce." As with some others we've seen, this was a team effort.

This next one comes to us from the Dalraida congregation down in Montgomery, Alabama. They say, "We are so excited that Allyse Rinae was baptized into Christ last night. We are so excited that she made this decision and commitment. Please remember Allyse in your prayers as she begins her walk with Christ!"

The last one this morning comes from Ryan Hasty, a self-employed software engineer from Alabama. The post, though, was made from Columbia. Ryan says that, "Yesterday, a brother and I requested an Uber to take me to preach in central Bogotá. The driver was a 20-yr old young man named Johan. We started talking to him about Jesus Christ and he became very interested and admitted that he could not stop thinking about what we talked about that same evening after he dropped us off. He agreed to meet us to study the one true gospel the next morning. After an hour of study and seeing in the Bible who Jesus Christ is what one must do to be saved, he asked to obey the gospel immediately. We baptized him for the remission of his sins (Acts 2). Unfortunately, I have to return to the US tomorrow and will not be able to spend more time with him. Please pray for Johan...pray that this is just the beginning of his growth in Jesus Christ, and that he can find a faithful

church to work with to expand the gospel.” That is amazing! And as always, we share these pictures by way of encouragement and as our invitation to you to consider obeying the good news yourself. If we can help, if you’d like to study together, please let us know. Pull me aside after worship, or give me a call or send a text to 608-224-0274.

This morning, we are returning to our study concerning HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE. We started several weeks ago by taking a look at the written word of God. Then we looked at the writing of ancient books. Then, we had two lessons where we asked whether the manuscripts we have today are reliable. This week we’ll take a look at the canon of scripture. And then next week we hope to look at what’s involved in translating God’s word into a language that we can understand. I’ll remind you, as I mentioned a few weeks ago when we first started this series: We covered most of this material back in 2011; but, since we’ve had some questions, and since it’s been a while, we are doing what may be a review for some of us.

Today, though, I want us to go back to the question that led to this series of lessons, and that is: How do we know which books should be in the Bible? Are we missing any? And how do we know that the books we have are actually scripture? In the request, one of our members actually used the word “canon.” Now, I should note, that he was not referring to an actual canon! The canon on the wall up here, by the way, can be found in St. Augustine, Florida. We stopped through there on our way down to visit with the church in Key West two years ago. This is at the Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, and this is the oldest masonry fortification in the continental United States. It was built by the Spanish to defend Florida and the Atlantic trade route. They definitely had some canons down there! But that’s not the kind of canon we’re talking about this morning.

Instead, the “canon of scripture” refers to a collection of books that are widely recognized as being the word of God. The word itself goes back to a Greek word meaning “reed” or “stick.” It sometimes referred to a walking stick (it’s the basis for our English word “cane”). But the word “canon” as we are using it this morning came to refer to a measuring stick. And that’s why I have a measuring stick up here today. We have dozens of rulers, and tape measures, and other measuring devices at our house right now, but I had to get this one when we were finishing our basement nearly 25 years ago, and I needed something to measure and then to use as a guide for cutting the drywall with a utility knife. The other stick up here is a cubit. This was a gift from Spencer, after he paid a visit to the Creation Museum down in Kentucky. The cubit was the distance from a man’s elbow to the tip of his fingers, and it was standardized with a stick like this on a construction site, so they were all using the same standard.

So, just as we might use a yardstick (or some other measuring device) to measure something today, people in ancient times would examine various documents to see if they “measured up” as Scripture. If they met the standard, if they met the qualifications, they were included in a collection of sacred writings that were passed around as God’s word very early on. The word “canon,” in fact, is used several times in the New testament, with the clearest example in Galatians 6:16, where Paul refers to what he had just written in the book of Galatians and he says, ***“And those who will walk by this RULE, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.”*** In other words, Paul’s words in the book of Galatians were to be considered a ***“rule”*** or a ***“standard of measurement.”*** His words were a yardstick. Then, over the next several years, the early Christians started realizing that other writings were also to be considered a standard. Other writings measured up as well. In fact, a man by the name of Origen (who lived from 185-254 AD) alluded to the ***“canonized Scriptures.”*** In other words, at least in the early 200’s AD, people clearly realized that certain writings ***“measured up,”*** and others did not. In fact, there were many that did NOT measure up. Some would take advantage of the situation, to push a weird doctrine of some kind. They would take a famous character from the time of Christ, and they would write from that character’s perspective. A fan of Judas, for example, might write a ***“Gospel of***

Judas,” and would use that document to push some bizarre doctrine. I’ve thought quite a bit this week about the idea of “fan fiction.” Fan fiction is the practice of someone who’s a fan of a certain book or series writing his or her own material from the perspective of one of those characters. Well, people in ancient times would do that with famous characters from the Bible.

This morning, then, as we look at the Canon of Scripture, I want to divide our study into several parts: We’ll look at the difference between authority and canonicity. We’ll look at the Old Testament canon, then the New Testament canon. And then we’ll think about what is known as the Apocrypha, followed by a just a few comments on what are sometimes referred to as the “Lost Books.”

I. **Today, though, first of all, we really need to start by noting the DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND CANONICITY.**

Years ago, I had a discussion with a man from the Catholic Church, and when we got down to what the Bible actually says, the man was stuck. He could see that what he believed was wrong when compared to Scripture, and in the heat of the moment, the man referred to his own church, and he said, “Well, we gave you people the Bible, so who do you think you are?” At that moment, we were dealing with the issue of authority. In his mind, at least, his church gave us the inspired books, his church told us which books were scripture, so now we have no real right to make any arguments from those books that in any way contradict the Catholic Church. We need to realize, though, that a book’s canonicity (that is, whether it should be in the Bible) depends on its authority (whether it is from God), and not the other way around. In other words, at no point in history was a book of the Bible meaningless until it got voted on by some council. Instead, the book (let’s just say the book of Galatians, for example) was authoritative the moment Paul’s words hit the paper. The authority of that letter was immediate and did not depend on “getting voted into the Bible” hundreds of years later. Again, canonicity depends on authority, and not the other way around.

For an example of this, let’s look together at 1 Corinthians 14:37 (p. 1800). In this passage, we are about to discover that when Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he was actually writing the word of God. In other words, what Paul wrote was authoritative long before anyone ever said, “Hey, let’s put this in the Bible!” Notice, please, what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:37. He’s writing about the spiritual gifts, and he says, ***“If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment.”*** In other words, Paul’s letter had authority long before it was ever included in any list of canonical writings.

In fact, we have an interesting quote from Peter concerning Paul’s writings. The passage comes at the end of 2 Peter (p. 1903). Peter is writing about false teachers who love to twist God’s message concerning the coming judgment, and this is what Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:14-16,

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

So, even as Peter writes (in roughly 66 AD), Peter understands that Paul (his contemporary) is writing “scripture.” Peter knows that Paul is writing the word of God, as he writes it. Later, of course, these writings were accepted as canonical because they had authority. The books and letters were not given authority simply

because some council put them on a list. 1 Corinthians, therefore, has authority because it was inspired, not because someone SAID it was inspired. Remember: The word “inspiration” refers to the fact that a document is “God-breathed.” So, there is no vote that can ever make a letter inspired; but instead, a letter is inspired and is then gradually accepted as such. I say “gradually,” because there is not one specific date where the Bible as we have it today just suddenly appeared. There is not some printing press in heaven dropping down completed Bibles on us. But rather, over a period of time, various letters and books were slowly accepted and recognized as being inspired as a result of looking at the evidence.

Generally, evidence for inspiration is divided into internal and external evidence. Internally, for example, we would expect an inspired document to agree with other documents we know to be inspired. We would also expect an inspired document to be historically accurate (in terms of events as well as the names of people and places). We would also expect such a document to claim to be from God. And then externally, we would look for whether those who read it for the very first time considered it to be inspired. Did the first readers recognize that it was written by an apostle or by someone closely associated with the apostles? And by using these standards, these measurements, we start to see a collection of books that “measure up” as the authoritative and inspired word of God.

II. For an example of this basic idea, let’ take a look at THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON.

As I understand it, scholars basically agree that by the time of Jesus, the canon of the Old Testament had already been set. In fact, Jesus and the apostles quote from the books that we now know as the “Old Testament,” and they refer to them as “scripture.” In Acts 8:32, for example (p. 1715), we find a reference to the Ethiopian officer reading from the prophet Isaiah, and Luke (the one who writes this) says, ***“Now the passage of scripture which he was reading was this: ‘He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he does not open his mouth.’”*** Well, that’s obviously a quote from Isaiah 53, and Luke (the author of this account) refers to Isaiah as being ***“scripture.”*** In other words, in the First Century, Isaiah was commonly considered to be the word of God. It was God’s word, not because someone voted on it, but it was God’s word from the moment it was written, and over time it was accepted as such. It was part of the Old Testament “canon.” We see something similar in Romans 4:3 (p. 1763). As Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6, he says, ***“For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”*** So, here again, Paul recognizes the book of Genesis as being ***“scripture.”*** It was scripture, not because Paul said it was, but it was considered scripture because it came from God.

Well, not only do we have examples of this from the Law and the Prophets (as we’ve already seen), but we also have an example of the Psalms being referred to as ***“scripture,”*** and this comes from Jesus himself. In Matthew 21:42 (p. 1540), Jesus is arguing with the religious leaders, and Matthew tells us (in Matthew 21:42) that, ***“Jesus said to them, ‘Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner stone; this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’”*** So, Jesus is quoting from Psalm 118:22, and he describes this passage (a Psalm) as being ***“scripture.”***

We have another example in Luke 24 (p. 1652). As Jesus is getting ready to leave this earth and ascend back into heaven, he’s commissioning the apostles (in Luke 24:44-47), and he says to them,

“These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for

forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

Notice, when Jesus refers to the *"Scriptures,"* he includes, *"...the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms."* Very interesting! That's all of the Old Testament. Everything we have fits into one of those three categories. In fact, in roughly 95 AD, the Jewish historian Josephus refers to the books of the Old Testament as being twenty-two, and when we divide them the way they did (combining 1-2 Samuel, combining Ezra-Nehemiah, and combining Jeremiah and Lamentations, for example), we have the same number and the exact books today as they did back then, way back in 95 AD. So, this is the "Old Testament" canon...

III. ...what about THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON?

As with the Old Testament canon, we don't really have a single date or council where we have any kind of an official "ruling," but we find that very early on certain books were recognized as being inspired. We have an interesting statement, for example, from an early Christian known as Justin Martyr. Justin Martyr said that on Sundays in the Christian worship assemblies, the "memoirs of the apostles" were read together along with the "writings of the prophets." Justin Martyr lived from 103-165 AD. So, mid-way through the Second Century, not too long after the last New Testament document was written, we have certain writings from the apostles being read in worship along with the Old Testament scriptures. In other words, those writings of the apostles were put on the same level as those 22 inspired books from the Old Testament. The writings of the apostles "measured up" as scripture. From Colossians 4:16, we know that Paul's writings were circulated among the churches from the moment they were written. We've already looked at this verse earlier in this series, but in Colossians 4:16, Paul says, *"When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea."* So, Paul's letters were circulated immediately, even when Paul was still alive.

From history, we know that Paul's writings were collected first, then the four gospel accounts, and then the rest followed rather quickly. However, since these collections were made at different times and in many different places, the contents of the various collections were not always the same, especially early on. A book like Hebrews, for example, with an unknown author, took a bit longer than the other books to be universally accepted as scripture. To put this in terms we can hopefully understand: If Paul wrote to the churches in Madison, and Janesville, and Milwaukee, we would share these letters between our congregations almost immediately, "Hey, Paul wrote us a letter, and we made you guys a copy!" However, if John were to write something to the church down in Miami, it would obviously take us a bit longer to hear about that here in Madison. Well, so also in the First Century.

So, we have that reference from Justin Martyr in roughly 150 AD (the reference to the memoirs of the apostles being read in various churches), and within the next hundred years or so, we start seeing lists pop up, as people start making copies of those books and letters that are being read publicly. One of the earliest lists is known as the Muratorian Fragment, which dates to the mid-Second Century. Parts of that list have been lost, but it gives a pretty good summary. Luke is first, but it's described as "the third gospel." We assume that Matthew and Mark are the first two. Luke is then followed by John, Acts, 13 letters from Paul, two letters from John, and Revelation. Hebrews, James, 1-2 Peter, and parts of John's letters are missing. The Muratorian Fragment, however, does include two books we do NOT recognize as scripture today – the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Peter. But the Apocalypse of Peter has a comment with it that says that "some of our people" do not want to have it read in church, recognizing that there was an ongoing discussion (even in the mid-Second Century) concerning what books should be included in any list of inspired writings. On the other hand, the list specifically excludes the Shepherd of Hermas and claims that it was written "quite late in

our time in the city of Rome” (around 140 AD). And that’s interesting, because it shows that they emphasized writings that dated back to the time of the apostles and excluded later writings.

In the Third Century (in the 200’s AD), a man by the name of Origen lists the four gospel accounts in the order we have them today (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). He accepts Acts, 13 letters from Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude, and Revelation. He’s hesitant concerning Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and 2-3 John). He quotes from Hebrews, but he concedes that some congregations don’t accept it. Later in life, though, Origen lists the same 27 books we have today. So, by the early 200’s AD, Christians recognized basically the same books we have today as being inspired and authoritative; in other words, they “measured up.”

In 367 AD, a man by the name of Athanasius of Alexandria published a list of 27 books, the same as our list today, and after his list he says, “...these are the springs of salvation...let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them.”

Last week, I shared a list of recommended reading concerning the question of how we got the Bible in its current form, and on that list was a book by Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*. After all of his comments on canonicity, this is what he says:

In conclusion, it is important to realize that no church council *made* the canon of Scripture. No church by its decrees gave to or pronounced on the books of the Bible their infallibility. The Bible owes its authority to no individual or group. The church does not control the canon, but the canon controls the church. Although divine authority was attributed to the New Testament books by the later church, this authority was not derived from the church but was inherent in the books themselves. As a child identifies its mother, the later church *identified* the books which it regarded as having unique authority.

I would agree with that statement 100%, and I hope that helps clarify how we came to have the books that we now have in the Bible. For further reading on this, I would suggest looking into *The Canon of Scripture*, by F.F. Bruce.

IV. Before we close, we do need to at least briefly address a group of books known as the APOCRYPHA.

The word APOCRYPHA means “hidden” or “covered.” And I should mention here that Catholics and Protestants completely agree on the 27 books of the New Testament. However, Catholics claim an additional 14-15 books in the Old Testament (depending on the method of counting those), and these books were written between 300 BC and 100 AD. Some stand on their own (like Tobit and Judith), and other parts of the Apocrypha are tacked on to the end of other books as an extra chapter (like Bel and the Dragon, which is tacked onto the end of the book of Daniel). However, I would pass along four very basic reasons why the Apocrypha should not be included in the Bible.

First of all, the 14-15 books of the Apocrypha were NEVER included in the Old Testament canon. You might remember how Josephus (in 95 AD) limited the Hebrew scriptures to 22 books (39 when you divided them like we divide them today). This is especially important when we remember that the Old Testament is a Jewish document. In other words, the Jews themselves did not accept the Apocryphal books as inspired. In fact, according to one of my main sources, there is no evidence that the Apocrypha was ever accepted by any Jewish community. That should tell us something.

Secondly, it is important to note that the books of the Apocrypha were never accepted (or even quoted) by Jesus or the apostles. In the New Testament, there are many references (hundreds of references) to many Old Testament events and passages, and almost every Old Testament book is quoted in the New, but the New Testament writers NEVER quote a book from the Apocrypha. That, also, should tell us something.

Thirdly, the books of the Apocrypha were never accepted as Scripture by any of the early Christian writers. In fact, around 400 AD, Jerome (whose Latin Vulgate translation is still the basis for the Roman Catholic Bible), strongly maintained that these books were not to be included in the canon of scripture.

And finally, the books of the Apocrypha do not “measure up” to the level of inspiration. Remember: the word “canon” refers to a reed that was used for measurement, a yardstick, and the material in the Apocrypha does not measure up. There are some huge chunks that are obviously fictitious, and the books often contain historical, chronological, and geographical errors. In Judith 1:1, for example, the Apocrypha says that Nebuchadnezzar was the “King of the Assyrians in the great city of Nineveh.” And yet if you are familiar with history, you know that Nebuchadnezzar was actually the king of the Babylonians in Babylon.

So, the books of the Apocrypha simply do not measure up. We may learn something from those books, but we are not to think of them as being inspired by God.

V. Then, in addition to the Apocrypha, we may also run across what are sometimes referred to as the LOST BOOKS. This is where we get back to the idea of “fan fiction.”

From time to time, we hear about other writings that some will try to pass off as scripture. With the Da Vinci Code book and movie a number of years back, we were re-introduced to the so-called “Gospel of Judas,” a book that claims that Jesus was in love with Mary Magdalene, that Jesus had children with Mary, and that Jesus basically conspired with Judas and gave Judas permission to betray him.

There are others, such as the “Infancy Gospel of Thomas,” which claims (among other things) that when another child bumps into Jesus as a child, Jesus strikes the other kid dead right there on the spot. Does that fit in with what we know about Jesus from other inspired writings? Absolutely not! We also have the so-called “Acts of John,” where John supposedly finds bedbugs in his bed at an inn and commands the bugs to leave and behave themselves. Or the so-called “Acts of Paul,” where Paul baptizes a lion, and the lion later spares Paul from death in the amphitheater in Ephesus. But again these books are not really “lost gospels,” they were never widely accepted by the early church, but instead, they were written many years later and definitely do not “measure up” as Scripture.

Conclusion:

In summary, the word of God was authoritative the moment those words hit the page. Those documents were shared between congregations almost immediately, and were rather quickly collected as the early church came to a rather unanimous decision as to which documents “measured up” as scripture. Next week, let’s continue our study by thinking about what’s involved in translating these ancient documents in a way that benefits us today. Let’s close our study today by going to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We are thankful this morning for your written word. We are thankful that your word has been preserved for us down through the years. What an amazing blessing! Help us, Father, to listen and to obey. We ask for your help as we share your message of love to the world around us.

We come to you this morning in Jesus' name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com