

the canon

DUNWOODY BAPTIST CHURCH

Big Idea: Historical study of where the Bible came from and how we got the Canon.

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Introduction: Card Game. Each group is to take a deck of cards and create a card game. Decide how many cards to use, which ones will be "wild" or will represent something unusual. Hint: Decide on a card game that is somewhat understood (Go Fish, Battle, Spades) and alter the rules. Starting from scratch could be fun, but overwhelming. Another hint is to combine two types of games like trivia and battle, etc.)
- B. Debrief: the establishment of the Canon was the decision of inspired church fathers to decide (under God's leadership) which books to keep in our Bible and which books were not to be considered to be divinely inspired. Big job.
- C. Before you go down the road of believing that men arbitrarily decided what would be in the Bible, consider a quote:

The church no more gave us the New Testament Canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity by His work of creation, and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon by inspiring the original books that make it up. - J.I. Packer

II. WHY WAS A CANON NECESSARY?

- A. As we continue our study on apologetics, a few review comments are necessary
- B. The intelligent defense of our faith (definition of apologetics) involves a defense of the Bible as our source of authority.
- C. Once we are comfortable with the authority of the Bible and our ability to handle it correctly, we can move on to specific answers to modern challenges.

1 Tim 4:11-16

¹¹ Command and teach these things. ¹² Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. ¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. ¹⁴ Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. ¹⁵ Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. ¹⁶ Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (NIV)

- D. The Canon represents the inspiration, not only of the writers, but also of the ones who assembled the collection of "papyrus" as we know it today.

Note: source material for this talk is taken from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, ©1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

III. THE CANON OF THE BIBLE

- A. The word canon means a "rod"-specifically, a rod with graduated marks used for measuring length. This word refers to the list of individual books that were eventually judged as authoritative and included as a part of the Old Testament and the New Testament.
- B. The early formation of the canon of the Old Testament is not easy to trace. Its threefold division in its early history-the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings-may reflect the three stages of its formation. From the beginning, the Law was accepted, even if it was not always obeyed. Evidence of its acceptance would include Moses' reading of "the Book of the Covenant" to the people at Mount Sinai and the people's response, "All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient" (Ex 24:7).

- C. Further evidence of acceptance of the Law includes the discovery of the "Book of the Law," probably the Book of Deuteronomy, in the Temple of Jerusalem during King Josiah's reign and the religious reform which followed (2 Kings 22:8-23:25). Also, following the return of the Jewish people from the Babylonian Captivity, "the Book of the Law of Moses" was read to the people of Jerusalem under Ezra's direction. This book became the constitution of their new nation (Neh 8).
- D. The second division of the Old Testament accepted by the Jewish people was the Prophets. The prophets' words were preserved from the beginning by their disciples, or by others who recognized the prophets as messengers of God. In general, their words were probably written shortly after they were spoken, for their authority as God's messengers came before their widespread acceptance by the Jewish people. The words of the prophets were not regarded as authoritative because they were included in the Old Testament; they were included because they were considered to be authoritative.
- E. The third division of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Writings, may have remained "open" longer than the first two. Scholars know less about the formation of this division than the first two.
- F. The "Bible" which Jesus used was the Hebrew Old Testament. He left no instructions about forming a new collection of authoritative writings to stand beside the books which He and His disciples accepted as God's Word. The Old Testament was also the Bible of the early church, but it was the Old Testament as fulfilled by Jesus. Early Christians interpreted the Old Testament in the light of His person and work. This new perspective controlled the early church's interpretation to such a degree that, while Jews and Christians shared the same Bible, they understood it so differently that they might almost have been using two different Bibles.

IV. NEW TESTAMENT CANON

- A. The works and words of Jesus were first communicated in spoken form. The apostles and their associates proclaimed the gospel by word of mouth. Paul taught the believers orally in the churches which he founded when he was present. But when he was absent, he communicated through his letters.
- B. Quite early in its history, the church felt a need for a written account of the teachings of Jesus. His teachings did provide the basis for the new Christian way of life. But the church grew so large that many converts were unable to rely on the instructions of those who had heard and memorized the teachings of Jesus. From about A.D. 50 AD onward, probably more than one written collection of sayings of Jesus circulated in the churches. The earliest written gospel appears to have been the Gospel of Mark, written about A.D. 64 AD.
- C. An individual gospel, a letter from an apostle, or even several works circulating independently, would not amount to a canon, or an authoritative list of books. A canon implies a collection of writings. There is evidence that two collections of Christian writings circulated among the churches at the beginning of the second century. One of these was the gospel collection-the four writings which are commonly called the four gospels. The other collection was the Pauline collection, or the letters of the apostle Paul. The anonymous letter to the Hebrews was added to this second collection at an early date.
- D. Early Christians continued to accept the Old Testament as authoritative. But they could interpret the Old Testament in the light of Jesus' deeds and words only if they had a reliable record of them. So, alongside Moses and the prophets, they had these early writings about Jesus and letters from the apostles, who had known Jesus in the flesh.
- E. When officials of the early church sought to make a list of books about Jesus and the early church which they considered authoritative, they retained the Old Testament, on the authority of Jesus and His apostles. Along with these books they recognized as authoritative the writings of the new age-four gospels, or biographies on the life and ministry of Jesus; the 13 letters of Paul; and letters of other apostles and their companions. The gospel collection and the apostolic collection were joined together by the Book of Acts, which served as a sequel to the gospel story, as well as a narrative background for the earlier epistles.
- F. The primary standard applied to a book was that it must be written either by an apostle or by someone close to the apostles. This guaranteed that their writing about Jesus and the early church would have the authenticity of an eyewitness account. As in the earliest phase of the church's existence, "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42) was the basis of its life and thought. The apostolic writings formed the

charter, or foundation documents, of the church.

- G. None of the books written after the death of the apostles were included in the New Testament, although early church officials recognized they did have some value as inspirational documents. The fact that they were written later ruled them out for consideration among the church's foundation documents. These other writings might be suitable for reading aloud in church because of their edifying character, but only the apostolic writings carried ultimate authority. They alone could be used as the basis of the church's belief and practice.
- H. Behind the Bible is a thrilling story of how God revealed Himself and His will to human spokesmen and then acted throughout history to preserve His Word and pass it along to future generations. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa 40:8).

V. CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION (OLD TESTAMENT)

- A. Authorship by a recognized prophet of God or leader in Israel
- B. Internal evidence of its inspiration and authority.
- C. Writings containing obvious doctrinal and factual errors were eliminated.
- D. Further validation was given to certain OT books when they were quoted from by Christ or the NT writers and referred to as Scripture
- E. The 12 books of the Apocrypha were not accepted as part of the biblical canon for these reasons
 - 1. They did not appear in any Hebrew Canon
 - 2. None were quoted in the New Testament
 - 3. They were not included in any early lists
 - 4. Their content (some) was too mythological

VI. CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION (NEW TESTAMENT)

- A. Test of apostleship (written by an apostle)
- B. Historical accuracy
- C. Doctrinal

VII. ARRANGEMENT OF THE BIBLE

- A. The arrangement of the Old Testament with which readers today are most familiar has been inherited from the pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament (the SEPTUAGINT) - an arrangement which was also followed by the later Latin Bible (the Vulgate). This arrangement has four divisions: the Pentateuch, the historical books, poetry, and prophecy.
- B. The New Testament opens with five narrative books-the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The gospels deal with the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Book of Acts continues the story of the development of the early church across the next 30 years. Acts serves as a sequel to the gospels in general; originally it was written as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke in particular.
- C. Twenty-one letters, or epistles, follow the historical narratives. Thirteen of these letters bear the name of the apostle Paul as writer, while the remaining eight are the work of other apostles or of authors associated with apostles. The last book in the New Testament, the Revelation of John, portrays through visions and symbolic language the accomplishment of God's purpose in the world and the ultimate triumph of Christ.
- D. , especially, proclaim the grateful response of men and women who experienced the grace and righteousness of God. These faithful people sometimes voiced their appreciation in words addressed directly to God. At other times they reported to others what God had come to mean to them.

VIII. PRESERVATION OF THE BIBLE

- A. The Bible is a written, authoritative record by which any teaching or theory may be judged. But behind the writing lay periods of time when these messages were circulated in spoken form. The stories of the patriarchs were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth before they were written. The messages of the prophets were delivered orally before they were fixed in writing. Narratives of the life and ministry of Christ were repeated orally for two or three decades before they were given literary form. But the Bible owes its preservation to the fact that all these oral narratives were eventually reduced to writing. Just as God originally inspired the Bible, He has used this means to preserve His Word for future generations.
- B. The first person in the Bible to write anything down was Moses. God instructed Moses to write as a permanent memorial the divine vow that the name of Amalek would be blotted out (Ex 17:14). From that time until the end of the New Testament age, the writing of the many books and parts of the Bible continued.
- C. None of the original biblical documents-referred to by scholars as the "original autographs"-has survived. No scrap of parchment or papyrus bearing the handwriting of any of the biblical authors has been discovered. But before the original documents disappeared, they were copied. These copies of the original writings are the texts on which current translations of the Bible are based.
- D. The process of copying and recopying the Bible has continued to our time. Until the middle of the 15th century A.D., all the copying was done by hand. Then, with the invention of printing in Europe, copies could be made in greater quantities by using this new process. Each copy of the Bible had to be produced slowly by hand with the old system, but now the printing press could produce thousands of copies in a short time. This made the Scriptures available to many people, rather than just the few who could afford handmade copies.
- E. The older handwritten copies of Bible texts are called manuscripts. Early manuscripts for the books of the Bible were written on papyrus or skin. Papyrus was a type of ancient paper manufactured from a reed plant that grew in the Nile Valley and similar environments. Papyrus was inexpensive, but it was not very durable. It rotted quickly when exposed to dampness.
- F. The ancient papyrus manuscripts which have been discovered were found in the dry sands of Egypt and other arid places. Great quantities of inscribed papyri have been recovered from the Egyptian sands during the last hundred years dating from the period shortly before and after the beginning of the Christian era, about A.D. 30 AD. A few scraps of papyri containing ancient texts of the Bible have been among the recovered manuscripts.
- G. The skins of animals proved to be a much more durable writing material than papyrus. Many different writing materials were manufactured from such skins. Some were a coarse form of leather. Others were subjected to a special refining process, emerging as a writing material known as parchment. Vellum, another valued writing material, was made from calfskin. Some of the most important manuscripts of the Bible were written on vellum.