

Doctrine of Scripture

Part Four

We are continuing and concluding our brief series on the *Doctrine of Scripture* this morning, picking up with the second half of a two-part look at the *Canon of Scripture*. Now, as you may remember, when we talk about the “canon” of Scripture we are talking about the particular collection of books and letters that make up the Bible which we hold in our hands, and which the Church has held in its hands for quite some time now.

In our previous study we focused upon the Old Testament, thinking about how it was that the particular books which we find there came to be regarded as Scripture. We saw how God used various central OT figures - such as Moses, Samuel, David, etc - to reduce to writing his special revelation, under the over-arching guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit.

And then we saw how God providentially made sure that those books were guarded and passed on by God’s people until the point when the last of the OT books was written. And then we saw how these 39 books became a “collection”, an identifiable “set” of writings and prophecies that were recognized by God’s people as being distinct and separate from any other collection of books - so much so that more than 400 years later we see Jesus quoting from almost all of them, individually. But more important than the fact that Jesus quoted from so many of the OT books is the fact that Jesus thought about and on at least one occasion even *referred* to the completed set of OT Scriptures - *as a unit* (see Matt 23:35).

Which brings us then to the matter of the formation of the NT canon of Scripture and also to the question of how we should think about the numerous other writings that were circulating around and which *weren’t* included in Scripture - and why. That’s what we’ll be looking at together this morning. Before we go any further, however, let’s pray,

Great Father in heaven, we come together this morning around the name of your Son, and to honor and praise you through the fruit of his - and your - labor and sacrifice. And Father as we think again this morning about your Word and how WE came to acknowledge and recognize that fact, we ask that you would impress upon us, again and again, that we do not do these things as JUDGES of your Word. Nor do we do these things so that your Word WILL become precious to us but because it IS precious to us, because it is through this Word that we have come to know you and to believe in your Son. It is through this word and the preaching and speaking of this word that we have been brought from death to life. And it is through this Word and your continued application of it to our hearts - most especially through the truth of the Gospel - that we are daily being confronted with our sin, and amazed at your grace. And so it is that through this means your image - which remains in us but which WE have defaced - is being restored. So we thank you for this Word - and for being the Author and Preserver of it, and for all that you do in and through it. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

A few weeks ago, at the beginning of this series, we talked about *what* God's revelation is. And if you were here at that time then you may remember me saying that with God's revelation there is much more going on than God just sharing *ideas* with us. God has gone way beyond that to share not only his *ideas* but also his very *self* with us. God doesn't just want us to know what he *thinks*, he wants us to know *him*.

As a consequence, in addition to revealing God's *thoughts*, the Scriptures also record and explain God's *actions* as they pertain to *human history*, in general, and to *his people*, in particular. To simplify that we can say that God's revelation of himself has involved both *words* and *events*, and even *words about those events*.

In the OT we learn, through Genesis, how in the very beginning God's speech and His actions combined in the creation as he *spoke* the universe into being. God said, "Let there be..." and *things happened*, things *appeared*, at the mere utterance of the words. And then, sometime after all this speaking and creating, God inspired his servant Moses to make a record of these things, as well as subsequent goings on, for his people. And that pattern of God's ACTIONS being illuminated and explained by his SPEECH - through his messengers - that pattern continued throughout the OT era and into the New.

And so it is that with the coming of Jesus, we see the most powerful combination of God's speech and action since the time of the initial creation itself. As God's son, Jesus Christ takes on human flesh and is, in fact, not just *God* become one of us but is specifically described by John as "...the Word of God made flesh..." Everything God had previously revealed about himself was now revealed in Jesus Christ, only more powerfully and more clearly than ever before. To put it another way - Jesus was, at one and the same time, the most profound "word" ever spoken by God and the most amazing "deed" God ever performed.

And so, in a pattern not too much different from that found in the formation of the OT, we have once again - in the NT era - the *actions* of God followed by the *record* and *explanation* of those actions by those through whom God worked to produce the various Scriptures of the NT.

And so, the NT starts with this amazing speech/act of God that is his Son. And then, not long after Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven, several biographies about Jesus' life were produced by Mark, Matthew, Luke and John - and probably in that order. Additionally, Luke wrote not only a biography of Jesus but also a companion volume called Acts which records the movement and development of the early church as Jesus' disciples went about sharing his story and message with others. And so, in the original writings, Luke and Acts are part of the same work.

Following that are a number of letters - some of them to specific churches and some of them *general letters* - but all of which address certain matters which arose within the various Christian communities that were starting to spring up all over the place. These letters were collected and circulated and *meticulously copied* as they were passed around between the various churches.

Lastly, there is the book of Revelation which, in contrast to all the other books in the New Testament - that primarily look *backward* - in contrast to that, Revelation looks *forward* to the significance of Christ's second coming as a means of encouraging God's people who are struggling in their present environment. It's sort of a combination of a prophecy and a pastoral letter.

And so the end result was that the four Gospels, the one book of history (Acts) the letters or "epistles" and the book of Revelation - these 27 books are what, over time, came to be known as the "New Testament Canon" of Scripture. Now, just as was true with the Old Testament canon of Scripture - the recognition and reception of the New Testament books as being *uniquely authoritative* was - and still is - ultimately a product of the Holy Spirit's work. There wasn't some central committee that sat down one day and said, "Alright - Mark's Gospel - that's in, the Gospel of Thomas - that's out, 1 Corinthians - that's in, etc." That isn't how it happened.

What happened with the NT books is what happened with the OT books. As these books were completed and circulated, God's people recognized their uniqueness and authority. They recognized the Holy Spirit's "mark" upon them - if I can put it that way. Now the dynamic in operation throughout all of this is the same one referred to in John 10,

John 10:1-5 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. ² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, **and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.** ⁵ **A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers."**

One of the consistent metaphors or "images" for the people of God - in both the Old and New Testaments has been to refer to them as "sheep" and to God as the "shepherd" who loves and cares for his sheep. With these words, Jesus was drawing upon that imagery to make the point that one of the distinguishing characteristics of God's people, one of the things that is true about them in every age is their *ability to recognize their shepherd's voice*.

Now, to be sure, Jesus spoke those words for his disciples - who were right in front of him. They had seen his actions and heard his voice - and it was a voice of authority; the same authority, in fact, that they recognized every time they heard the OT Scriptures.

But here's the thing: While Jesus' *initial* followers consisted of people who were standing right in front of him, and who recognized his authority in that way - Jesus also spoke of others who would become his followers later on - i.e., after he was gone, when he was no longer, personally, in the picture. This is what Jesus refers to a little further along in John, chapter 10,

John 10:14-16 *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,* ¹⁵ *just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.* ¹⁶ ***And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.***

Here Jesus himself speaks of “other sheep” - other people, who were not presently with Him, but who would also “hear his voice” and follow him. But here’s the question: How was this going to happen? How did Jesus see this working out? He knew that he was going to be handed over to the authorities very soon. He knew he was going to die and be resurrected and then return to his father in heaven. So, knowing all that, why does Jesus say these things? What is he thinking? How are his *future followers* going to “hear his voice” and recognize it?

Well, I think there are at least two answers to that question. For one thing, Jesus certainly understood and planned that after his departure his ministry would be continued by his hand-picked apostles. And Jesus’ clear expectation was that these special apostles would be received in the same way that he was received, and would bear the same mark of authority that he himself bore. Listen to Matthew 10, verse 40, where Jesus, talking to his disciples, says,

Matthew 10:40 *"Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."*

So, one thing that Jesus seems to have been clearly counting on was the apostles, carrying on in his stead. Jesus had come to earth on behalf of God the Father, and he was commissioning his apostles to go into the world as *his* representatives. And through the Apostles’ ministry, through their preaching and teaching, other people would “hear” Jesus voice and respond.

But Jesus seems to have had in mind a *further* means by which his future followers would “hear” and recognize his voice. Two passages in John’s Gospel are helpful here,

John 14:25-26 ²⁵ *"These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, **he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.**"*

John 15:26 - 16:1 ²⁶ *"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. ²⁷ **And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.**"*

It seems to me that this process whereby the Holy Spirit “teaches” the apostles all things and “brings to their remembrance” everything that Jesus said to them - it seems that the *point* or *purpose* of such an exercise on the Holy Spirit’s part would have been to assist the apostles in their work of preaching and teaching, as well as to enable them to accurately preserve the record of Christ’s words and works, and the application of those things in the early days of the church’s establishment.

And so, the *further* means by which the people of God would come to “hear” and respond to the voice of Jesus the Shepherd, would be not only through the Apostles’ direct ministry but also *indirectly* through the things which the Holy Spirit helped them to recall and record. This would include the Gospel records of Jesus’ life and teachings but it would also include the *application* of those teachings as the Apostles carried on their apostolic work through letters to the various churches that were springing up all over the place.

In support of this perspective are various pieces of *internal evidence* - that is, statements *within* the Scriptures which seem to evidence an awareness by the Apostles themselves that they served a unique role both in the *founding* of Christ's church, as well as in the *propagation* and *preservation* of a body of new and authoritative teachings that were beginning to circulate among the churches as an identifiable unit.

For example, in Ephesians 2:20 we see Paul talking about the church as having been "built upon the foundation of the **apostles and prophets**, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone". In other words, Paul saw the apostles - among whom he was one - as having a place that was at least the equivalent of the OT prophets - the same prophets through whom the Spirit had authored the OT Scriptures.

Then, in a number of different places, Paul makes a reference to certain "traditions" or "teachings" that were apparently in circulation in his day, Listen to the following verses,

2 Timothy 1:13-14 ¹³ *Follow the pattern of the sound¹ words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁴ *By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*

Paul talks there about a *pattern* and about a *good deposit that had been entrusted to them*.....

1 Timothy 6:20-21 ²⁰ *O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge,"* ²¹ *for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you.*¹

And even more explicitly we hear something similar in 2nd Thessalonians, chapter 2,

2 Thessalonians 2:15 ¹⁵ *So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.*

In these examples, Paul seems to clearly have in mind the idea that there was an accepted body of truth or "tradition", as he puts it, that they were to guard and preserve and pass on. And that passing on took the form of both *oral* communication as well as *written* communication. A similar sort of "apostolic self-awareness" can be found in the letters of Peter and John.

In addition to all of this, there are other *intra-canonical* references - i.e., places where one writer refers to or describes another's writings as Scripture. For example, there is the well-known statement made by Peter regarding Paul's writing, and in which he shows that he clearly regards Paul's writings as *Scripture*, found in 2 Peter 3:15-16. But perhaps *less* well known is Paul's statement in 1st Timothy 5:18,

1 Timothy 5:18 *For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."*

Here Paul is quoting directly from Luke 10, which could not have been written much before this, and yet Paul describes this source of his quotation as “Scripture”. In these and other places, we see that the Apostles seem to have been aware of their own authoritative and foundational roles - including the extension and expression of that authority in and through their writings.

Now, to be sure, while most of the NT documents come to us *directly* from the hand of an apostle - 21 to be exact - there are five that come to us *indirectly* (six, if you count Luke and Acts separately). They are: Luke/Acts, Mark, James, Jude, and Hebrews. Let me very briefly say something about these 6 books.

Luke/Acts - which, as we’ve just seen, are referred to by Paul as “Scripture”. Luke, the physician, was the almost constant companion and disciple of Paul from his 2nd Missionary journey onward.

Mark’s author is the “John Mark” referred to in Acts, who was also a companion of Paul and Barnabas.

James - is not James the Apostle but James, the half-brother of Jesus (i.e., child of Joseph and Mary, but not by the Holy Spirit). As a consequence of his location, in Jerusalem, and his ministry, James would have been in close contact with the Apostle Peter.

Jude - is also a half-brother of Jesus, describing himself as “a brother of James” and thus, no doubt, having an important role in the Jerusalem church as well as a close connection with the Apostle Peter.

Hebrews - is perhaps the most difficult to decide with regard to the question of authorship but all of the most likely candidates are either apostles (Paul) or companions of apostles (Barnabas, Apollos, etc).

In other words, in the 5 or 6 books that are not directly authored by Apostles, you have persons who were *in contact with and, most likely, under the supervision of the Apostles* and, very likely, were acting almost as amanuenses - that is, as “co-writers” or as people whose writing the Apostles had either commissioned, or authorized - or possibly both.

But beyond all of that, the thing that we must not lose sight of is the fact that these writings were given the same regard and were viewed in the same light as the other 22 writings that came to us directly at the hand of a founding Apostle. In other words, the historic testimony of the early church has been to regard both the directly AND the in-directly apostolic works as being on equal footing.

Now, with regard to this whole matter of how and why the various books were accepted, and why not everyone was on the same page right away with regard to all the books, a scholar named Bahnsen has some helpful things to say. He remarks that the works which God gave to His people for their Scriptures always received *immediate recognition* as inspired - by the people to whom they were *immediately* given. But this is not the same thing as their being *universally accepted* since that had to take place over time and through a process.

In other words, Bahnsen wants to make a distinction between the *recognition* of a book as being inspired by God by individual churches and *the churches universal acceptance of that fact - across the board*. Why? Well, let's think about this for just a moment....

Just as God chose to deliver his revelation through the agency of human beings, he also chose to *spread and establish* his Scriptures through the same sort of means. And you have to remember what things were like in those days. Communication was slow. Transportation was also slow, and often unreliable. And all the time that the true Scriptures were being written, false apostles were spreading their false teaching alongside the real thing. Because of all these sorts of realities, the process of the church *as a whole* coming face to face with *all* of the Scriptures and recognizing God's voice in them and embracing them for what they were, and agreeing upon an identifiable canon - that process was always going to be a long, drawn-out one.

In addition to the obstacles mentioned above, you also have to remember that this was all taking place in the days *before* the printing press and moveable type. And so anything that got duplicated was done by hand. That meant that copies of original writings were only produced slowly and whether or not you had access to any particular letter from any particular Apostle was as much a function of your *geography* as much as anything else. One church might have a copy of one of Paul's Corinthian letters, while another church had two Corinthian letters. Still another might have a copy of the letter to the Ephesians, and a copy of Mark's Gospel, but none of the Corinthian correspondence.

And that's just how it went because the NT hadn't been gathered and therefore was not being produced and sent around as a complete SET, but rather as *individual* letters or gospels. . And so, while each individual book, *as it was received*, by the various churches, would have been recognized for the authoritative "voice" that it was, it is also true that a number of years passed before enough churches had enough copies of the same sets of books that *lists* of NT books started to appear - as a collection. And these early lists did not all agree with one another - not at first. There were typically a few books that would be on one list, but not on another.

But this distinction between the *recognition* of a book as inspired by an *individual* church and the *universal acceptance* of a particular book by *all* the churches - that distinction helps to explain some of these early differences between the various "lists" of canonical books that were going around in those days. The discrepancies between the lists arose not primarily as a function of the books' content but more as a function of things like time and space and technology. However, by 397 AD, enough copies of the various letters had been made and circulated among the churches so that a universal consensus became possible for the first time and the canon that was recognized then has remained unchanged.

But what about the “other” books? What about the books that *didn't* make the cut? Where are they and how should we think about them? Well, there are two general categories of these “other” books that I want to talk about very briefly. One is called the *Apocrypha* and the other books are referred to as *Pseudepigrapha*.

The first category, the Apocrypha, is a reference to the 14 books that were written during the time between the Old and New Testaments - roughly around 200-100 BC. The word “Apocrypha” - which can mean things like “secret” or “hidden” - is in actual fact more accurate as a description of the mindset of the people who wrote these works than it is of the contents of the books themselves. Examples of these books include: *The Wisdom of Solomon*, *Ecclesiasticus*, *1 and 2 Esdras*, *Bel and the Dragon*, *Tobit*, etc. What are we to think about these?

Well, for starters, it needs to be said that the writings included in this category were *never* regarded as Scripture by God’s people in the Old Testament period - nor are they accepted by the Jews today. Josephus, an early historian, makes it clear that nothing written after what we know as the OT Scriptures was regarded as having the same authority or being on the same level as them. Additionally, when Christ came, he never quoted from the Apocryphal books or regarded them in the same way that he did the OT Scriptures.

Indeed, this is a further significance of Jesus’ comment in Matthew 23:35 - which we looked at a couple of weeks ago, and which was also referred to earlier. If you were here for that study, you may remember how Jesus’ words there indicated that he was familiar with the Jewish canon of Scripture - which was the same as ours in terms of its content and differs only in the *order* of the books - i.e., their sequence. Jesus’ reference to these as a unit - 400 years after the last book had been completed, is a strong testimony to the reality that there was a functioning OT canon, and that it had been in existence for quite some time.

But beyond that, Jesus’ comments and quotations also indicated his perspective upon the *Apocryphal* books - which was evidently not much. Because, in referring to the OT canon *as* he did and *when* he did Jesus effectively acknowledges this collection from 400 years before as being authoritative in his own day - *and completely bypasses the Apocryphal books, most of which were completed at least 100 years earlier*. In other words, Jesus completely “leap frogs” these books, and never refers to anything from the Apocrypha as Scripture while he *does* quote from the OT canon with *amazing* frequency.

So, if Jesus himself seemed to have no use for the Apocryphal books, which were all over the place in his day, how did they enter into the picture? Well, what happened, in a nutshell, was this: After the OT Scriptures were completed and during the time of the Greek conquest by Alexander the Great, the Jewish people were dispersed and ending up living in areas where the main language was not Hebrew but Greek. As a result, in 280 BC, the ruler Ptolemy II received a request to have the Hebrew law translated into Greek and placed in the great library in Alexandria, Egypt.

He obtained seventy-two Jewish translators to begin the work and, over time, the entire OT, and 14 apocryphal books were translated and made part of a collection called the *Septuagint*. The reason for the name is based on an un-confirmed story that the entire OT was translated in seventy days, the Roman numeral for which is LXX. And so, the Scriptures and these 14 other books were all included in one package that came to be known as the Septuagint.

But - and here's the thing you don't want to miss - they were not packaged together because *God's people* felt that they were all the same. They were packaged together because a *pagan curator* of a pagan library requested that all these Hebrew writings would be translated and preserved. So they were.

Then, later on, the Greek Septuagint was translated into first one Latin Version and then later on, in the 4th century, into what became known as the Latin Vulgate. Now this edition, unlike the Septuagint, WAS commissioned by the church and the scholar in charge of that work - a man named Jerome - if he had things his way would have simply omitted the Apocryphal books from his translation. However, it would seem that he did not have a choice in the matter and had translated some of the Apocryphal books before he died, at which point the other books were just brought in from the Old Latin version and hastily translated and included.

But Jerome himself, even though he followed the instructions given to him and translated the OT AND the apocryphal works, still said that everything outside what we recognize as the OT was to be set apart and should not be considered as part of the canon. The Apocryphal books said Jerome, are "for edification of the people but not for establishing the authority of ecclesiastical dogmas". Ironically, against the judgment of Jerome, the Roman Catholic church years later turned around and ignored Jerome's declaration about these books - and declared them canonical.

So, to sum up, the Apocryphal books were grouped together with the OT Scriptures *as an accident of history* and not as the result of the church's recognition of their authority. The witness of the church over the years has confirmed their secondary status - starting with Jesus and the Apostles, continuing with scholars like Jerome in 395 AD, Hugo of St Victor in 1140 AD, or John Wycliffe in 1395, or the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England in 1562. Indeed, the Protestant churches have NEVER accepted these books as canonical and they only were declared such very late in the game - in 1546 at the Council of Trent and more as a reaction against what was going on in the Protestant Reformation. At that council they declared that Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and Maccabees were canonical, while somewhat arbitrarily rejecting the other Apocryphal books. The books that were kept, essentially, *had* to be kept in order to maintain church views and practices that could not be justified in the Scriptures.

In addition to the earlier apocryphal works, there are many other documents that have appeared over the years - some earlier, some later - but most of them between the years 200 and 400 AD. These are the second category of books I referred to before and are called "Pseudepigrapha" - a word which means "false writings". The reason they are lumped in this category is because the *universal* testimony of the early church was that they were "absurd and impious" as one early church historian described them.

In other words, as soon as these works appeared on the scene, the church roundly rejected them and recognized them for the false teaching that they were. These are the books that you are most likely to hear about today in the pages of some poorly researched news story, or on the lips of some second-rate biblical scholar - of which there are thousands, such as Barbara Thiering. Examples of these works include titles like *The Gospel of Thomas* or *The Gospel of Peter* or *Judas*, and such things like that.

And the remarkable thing about these works is that, in spite of the fact that the universal testimony of the people who were closest to the time of their writing was that they were *nonsensical* and *heretical* - people today, thousands of years later and much farther removed from their writing want to say that these things writings are legitimate, are of equal or greater authority than the Scriptures themselves.

Indeed, sometimes the charge has been made that these works have been “suppressed” by the church. And certainly, the world loves the thought of such things - which is one reason for the great popular appeal of books like “The DaVinci Code”. Conspiracy sells.

But nothing could be further from the truth. These other books - roughly 300 of them - weren't suppressed at all. They were simply *ignored* because they were so clearly NOT on the same level as the Scriptures. God's people - in examining them, did not “hear” the Shepherd's voice, and have left them by the wayside of history as interesting and sometimes informative - but never as *authoritative*. If they *had* been the product of the Spirit's work, they would not be obscure and the church would not have been *able* to suppress them, even if they wanted to. And so, in the end, the fact that these books ARE obscure is perhaps the first and best clue as to their character and nature.

And so, in the end, the formation of the canon of the NT has come about, not as a result of some arbitrary process, nor as the result of some political or ecclesiastical agenda, but simply as the result of God's inspiring these writings and, by his Spirit, equipping and enabling his people to see and read aright the revelation he has provided. And so the collective testimony of God's people has been to say that these books - and no others - bear the imprimatur of God and thus are the only infallible guide for our life and practice.

No other book in the history of humankind has been so consistently and simultaneously respected and hated, studied and criticized, lauded and cursed. And yet, in spite of the intense scrutiny, in spite of the fact that in every generation its detractors put forth their tired theories, which they always imagine to be new and innovative but which, invariably, turn out to be a recycling of a previously discredited idea - in spite of all these things, the Bible remains the most read, most honored, most quoted, most well known collection of writings in human history.

Why? Because these are the very words of God. And as Jesus said, “Man does not live by bread alone - *but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*”