

KEY POINTS IN CHURCH HISTORY

Chapter 10 Part 2

The Accuracy and Collection of the “New Testament”

I was 16 years old when I bought my first Bible with my own money. It was a Harper Study Bible based on the Revised Standard Version. A brown leather cover, good-sized type, and some great notes made it a bargain at forty dollars. Of course, I didn't have 40 dollars, but Ron Bailey, owner of the Sentinel Bookstore in Lubbock, helped me figure out how I could get it anyway!

I loved that Bible. I carried it for a good decade, making notes in the margins as my studies and walk with the Lord progressed. That was the Bible I used when I first read Scripture all the way through. That was my Bible for church, for private study, and more. (The Bible got me into trouble one day in a Hebrew class I had on the Psalms, but that story is for another day.)

One Sunday evening, I looked for the Bible for my nightly quiet time only to find I had left it at church. That bothered me. I wouldn't be at church until Wednesday night at the earliest, and maybe not until the next Sunday. Because I was teaching class at church, it meant I would need to prepare my lesson out of another Bible, one without my priceless notes accumulated over a decade. Ugh.!

When I did get back to church, I searched for the Bible where I had left it. It was nowhere to be found. I looked in lost and found, but it wasn't there either. I had NOT written my identification in the Bible and I was concerned it was lost for good. Yet, I couldn't quite accept that. It seemed to me that in the interest of cosmic good, the Bible would one day find itself back into my hands.

Here I am thirty years later, still waiting! (If you happen to read this and have the Bible, I will pay postage to have it sent to me!!!) There's a lesson here about writing your name and phone number in your Bible.

There is something special about your Bible. It's not the kind of cover. It's not the paper or ink used. It's not even the size type (although I have been told that gets more important as age sets in). It is the content – the words. For believers, the Bible contains Scripture, the words of God.

In the 21st century, it is readily available in many languages in a good bit of the world. Certainly it is easily accessed in the United States. But it hasn't always been that way. In fact, if you want to look at a relatively complete Bible, the oldest one still available today dates from the mid-4th century. Why are we

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missing the original writings, or at least a better set of them than something 300 years later?

The uninitiated might ask, "If the early church believed in the inspiration and importance of the New Testament writings, why didn't the church keep and treasure the originals?" Ironically, it was the fact that the church did treasure the Scriptures that they are no longer with us. In the lifetime of the early church historian Eusebius (c.262-339), who wrote most of his works after becoming a bishop in 313, gave eyewitness accounts about the horrid persecutions under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. In late 302 or early 303, Diocletian issued an edict,

...ordering the churches to be razed to their foundations, and the Scriptures to be put out of existence by fire.¹

Diocletian's order was posted throughout the Roman Empire, ordering all copies of the Christian Scriptures and liturgical books to be surrendered and burned, all churches to be demolished, and no meetings for Christian worship to be held. The punishment for resistance was imprisonment, torture, and in some cases, death. Several documents, such as Acts of Martyrs, describe with vivid detail how this edict was carried out against Christians, their Scriptures and churches.

Eusebius wrote,

It was in the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian, in the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, when the feast of the Savior's passion was near at hand, that royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that the household servants, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom.²

A tenth century play recapitulated the story of an early persecution. Imagine you were there when three young women, Agape, Irene, and Chione, were interrogated by the prefect Dulcitus of Thessalonica. "Do you have in your possession any writings, parchments, or books of the impious Christians?" Chione replied, "We do not, Sir. Our present emperors have taken these from us." The next day the prefect asked Irene, "Who is it that advised you to retain these parchments and writings up to the present time?" She

¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk 8, Ch. 2, as translated by Deferrari, Roy, *The Fathers of the Church*, (Catholic University of America Press 1953), Vol. 29, at 167.

² 8 Euseb. 2:4.

replied, "It was almighty God, who bade us love him unto death. For this reason we did not dare to be traitors, but we chose to be burned alive or suffer anything else that might happen to us rather than betray them." All three were burned at the stake, after being placed naked in the public, and the writings found in their cabinets were burned publicly.

In another incident, the police made a raid at Cirta, capital of Numidia (now part of Algeria). The mayor came to the house where the Christians met and made a demand for books. The library was found empty, but the police went to the house of church officials. One subdeacon brought out one large codex (an early "book"). When asked why only one, he sent the police to the houses of readers. One produced 4 codices, another 5, then 8, 7, 2 with some loose sheets and finally the wife of one reader not at home produced 6 codices. All in a single round!

In another incident much earlier on July 17, 180 A.D., as related in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, twelve persons stood trial in Carthage. They refused to sacrifice to the gods or to swear by the "genius" of the Roman Emperor. During the trial, the proconsul asked, "What things do you have there in your satchel?" The answer was, "Books, and Epistles of Paul, a good man." This was probably a reference to the Gospels and the letters of Paul, incriminating evidence, which substantiated their condemnation and execution by sword.

But much larger forces were at work from the very beginning of Christian writings, forces that could never have been understood or analyzed at the time. These forces would eventually result in the collection of authoritative Christian writings that would serve as "the rule of faith," even to our own times. Such experiences in early Christianity played a role in demanding that believers decide which parts of the Bible were most cherished, which were even worthy of death.

Early church history records reveal many other times of persecution and martyrdom that would have, by all accounts, also resulted in the destruction of Scriptures supporting or endorsing the faith. The amazing thing is that so many manuscripts survived in light of the deliberate destruction! Manuscripts survived because the writings were not held to be simple musings or instructions from old dead people. They were understood to be treasured words of inspiration. They were words that came as a fulfillment to the prophecies of Jesus recorded in John 14-16, that the Holy Spirit would remind the apostles of important events, would explain the significance and meaning of Jesus' teachings, and would give them the words to testify as they should.

A confounding reason for the paucity of early manuscripts is the effect of climate on papyrus writings. Many early texts were written on papyrus, the fibrous material made from pressing the stems of the papyrus plant (from which also we derive the term “paper”). The papyrus, like other plants, decayed readily in humid and wet conditions. With very few exceptions, the papyrus fragments recovered from the first 300 years of the church all come from the hot and arid lands of Egypt.³

SURVIVING FRAGMENTS

Likely the oldest fragment known at this time is a small papyrus fragment of John’s gospel, called the John Rylands Fragment (for the museum/library that was holding the fragment when its content was first understood). The fragment was first published for the world in 1935, and is often known in scholarly circles by its papyrus designation, **p⁵²**. Although some have questioned the dating, a preponderance of scholars have dated the script to the first half of the second century, some further narrowing it down to 118-135AD.⁴

Even without finding more manuscripts, there are about 50 fragments extant from the early days of church persecution, and substantially more from the time after Christianity became the state religion of Rome under the Emperor Constantine (272-337). In addition to writing the early church history referenced previously, Eusebius authored a biography on the life of Constantine. In the biography, Eusebius reproduced a letter from the Emperor to Eusebius where the Emperor ordered fifty complete copies of Scripture:

Order fifty volumes with ornamental leather bindings, easily legible and convenient for portable use, to be copied by skilled calligraphists well trained in the art, copies that is of the Divine

³ Aland, Kurt and Aland, Barbara, *The Text of the New Testament*, (Eerdmans 1987), at 59. Just because we no longer have the original manuscripts, and even though so many early manuscripts were destroyed and burned, we are not without good solid early witnesses to what the original documents said. Our witnesses come from three main sources: (1) surviving fragments and manuscripts of New Testament writings, (2) quotes of the New Testament found in the writings of the early church fathers, and (3) early translations of the Greek New Testament into other languages.

⁴ Metzger, Bruce M. *The Text of the New Testament*, at 38ff. See the challenges to this dating summarized by Nongbri, Brent, “The Use and Abuse of p⁵²: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (Jan. 2005), at 23-48.

Scriptures, the provision and use of which you well know to be necessary for reading in church.⁵

This order came in the fourth century, which is the time period of the production of several of our best and most important Biblical manuscripts.

One of the most important manuscripts from this time period is called the “Codex Sinaiticus.” “Codex” is the word for old books that were assembled from handwritten pages. Sinaiticus refers to where the pages to this codex were found. The Codex Sinaiticus was discovered in St. Catherine’s monastery on Mount Sinai by Dr. Constantine von Tischendorf around 1844. Several Old Testament pages are missing, but the New Testament is complete. Because this manuscript is beautiful and is typically dated to about 350AD, some scholars suspect it might be one of the fifty copies ordered by Constantine.⁶ Principally using this manuscript, Tischendorf produced the best Greek text of his day, far eclipsing the earlier works of Erasmus, Estienne and others discussed in the earlier handout.

In addition to its invaluable help in aiding restoration of the autographs, this manuscript illustrates how many ancient codices were made. It was prepared in a scriptorium, what we might call an ancient print shop. Scriptoriums employed lectors or readers who would slowly read aloud a text. Employed scribes were experts at writing as the lector read. Ten scribes writing simultaneously could make ten copies as one lector read, in effect cutting the time of copy reproduction 90% from one person simply copying a manuscript before him.⁷ Any such method is always subject to errors as one mishears a word, or as one misunderstands a word (“great” or “grate”?). Therefore, after the scribes finished their writing, the scriptorium employed a corrector whose job was to proof the text and make necessary corrections. With modern science, we are generally able to discern both the allegedly erroneous underlying text as well as the corrected text. It appears that several correctors were involved in Sinaiticus at its first stage. 200-300 years later, another group of correctors made additional changes to Sinaiticus, indicating a different standard than the one used by the reader at the original scriptorium.

⁵ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Book 4, Ch. 36, translated by Cameron, Averil and Hall, Stuart (Oxford 1999), at 166-167.

⁶ Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, at 7.

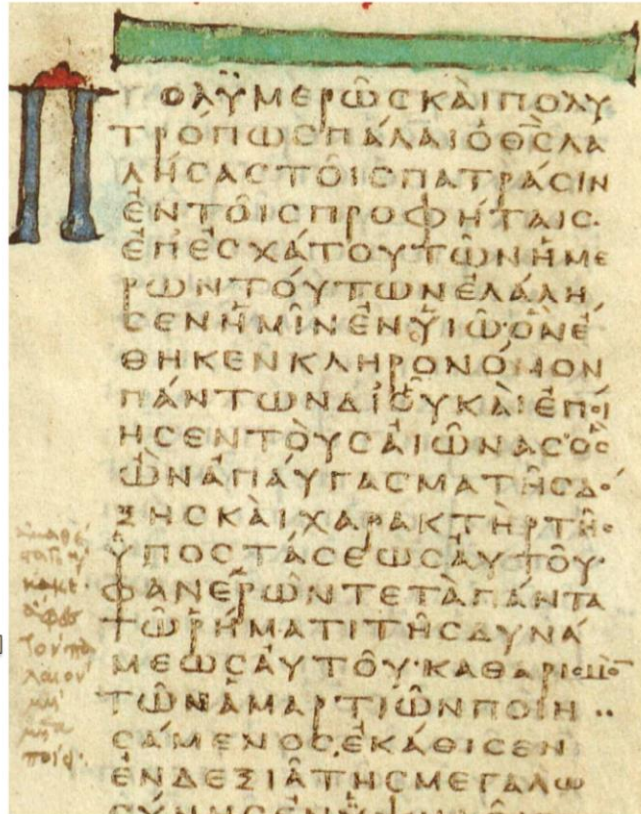
⁷ An interesting side note, scribes were typically paid by the line of what they wrote. The Codex Sinaiticus would have generally made a scribe somewhere around 30,000 denarii (although by 350 AD, the denarius was no longer minted). See, Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, at 15. It is hard to put a value on that in today’s monetary terms. At the time of Jesus, a denarius represented a day’s wages for an unskilled worker or common soldier. Inflation set in, and a denarius was not worth as much in the third century, the last century of production. Still, we can safely assume that the cost of a codex like Sinaiticus was quite large!

A second early and important codex is called Codex Vaticanus, after its location in the Vatican. This early codex shows the importance of the text in a marginal scribal note chiding an earlier copyist's attempts to change a word for accuracy. We can easily see this in the following picture:

This excerpt from Codex Vaticanus sets out the marginal note of an 13th century scribe chiding an earlier scribe for changing a word in Heb. 1:3.

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What Books are in the New Testament and Why?

Any analysis of the New Testament should not focus simply on whether the words of our texts today mirror the words as originally written. An equally important task lies in determining what group of writings is worthy of inclusion as Holy Scripture. There is, in the Christian faith, a baseline understanding that a special group of writings stand out from other common writings, even if the common writings are spiritual in nature. The Latin word for writings is *scriptura*, from which we derive “Scripture.” The English word “holy” means “set apart” or “special,” especially as something reverent of or from God. Hence Christians revere the Bible as “Holy Scripture.”

But who made the choice of what writings are “Holy” in this way? Was the decision simply a human one, as one group pushed their agenda over against

others? Are the “Holy Scriptures” really just those writings that support the theological positions of the victors in long forgotten theological wars? That is the position of some scholars. Skeptic Bart Ehrman and a handful of other scholars have tried to place this issue into mainstream thought. (I distinguish purely fictional works like Dan Brown’s *The DaVinci Code*, even though they trumpet many of the same or similar ideas.⁸)

A study of what makes the Christian canon must begin by recognizing *what* sets one writing apart from another. This is an issue of “inspiration,” but one where we must carefully understand the Biblical claims for Scripture.

As we do so, we proceed with a trial lawyer’s caution. All too often, witnesses, especially expert witnesses, testify to a position as if it were the only reasonable choice. Frequently these witnesses justify their positions by presenting it as a better choice when weighed against the alternative. So a witness might say, “As between A and B, I chose A because B is obviously inferior.” Now if there are only two choices (A and B), then the witness’s logic is okay. But many times there are options C, D, E, and more. For the witness to assume only two options is neither fair nor logical. This is a core problem with many experts who have written on this subject.

All too often, scholars assume the Bible must be either a divine production or a human production.⁹ These scholars, however, miss the Bible’s claim about itself.

⁸ This fictional work intertwines the legend of the Holy Grail, asserting that the grail was not a real chalice holding the blood (Last Supper wine) of Christ, but rather a figurative chalice holding the truth that Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ wife, pregnant at the time of the crucifixion, and that the “blood” of Christ was the bloodline or lineage of Christ. Brown gets his title from artistic works of Leonardo Da Vinci that he claimed gave key hints and clues to this secret past, including the Last Supper painting as well as the Mona Lisa. Brown’s novel has the church suppressing this truth for two thousand years. The book was released in 40 languages, made into a very successful movie, and made Brown a very wealthy man. Critically, the movie did not fare so well. It had no basis in fact, and was decried by scholars. It was also not well received by literary critics, with many making assessments not much different from Salmon Rushdie’s:

"Do not start me on 'The Da Vinci Code,' a novel so bad that it gives bad novels a bad name."

(Speech on October 7, 2005, as reported by Sofia Maines, in LJWorld. See: http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2005/oct/07/famed_author_takes_kansas/?city_local.)

Most recognized the fiction as fiction, and no real scholars supported the idea that Brown’s fiction was true.

⁹ Consider Bart Ehrman. Ehrman’s books all contain a consistent logical assertion with which I have often taken issue. He tells the reader that there are only two options when it comes to the Bible. For Ehrman, it is either a human book or a divine book. Ehrman uses his books to show the human elements, and lets that justify his dismissal of the Bible’s divine origins. Ehrman’s

It is not unusual to see these scholars refer to non-biblical gospels and early writings and call them “lost scriptures.” They promote the theory that the early church was a smorgasbord theologically, in no way agreeing upon what later “evolved” into orthodoxy. This theory argues that the canon represents the views of those who had enough power to silence those with alternate views. Orthodoxy, according to these scholars, was not a New Testament or first generation belief. It was one view among many in the early centuries that finally overpowered all others. Those books that were gathered into the Bible were supposedly selected only because they supported later church positions. This is the core issue in the canon: Is the canon the source for orthodoxy or is orthodoxy the source of the canon?

The Biblical claim is that the Bible is both a divine work *and* a human work. God has spoken *through* his prophets, and his Holy Spirit has worked *through* apostles and others to produce the Scriptures we have today. God *entrusted* the Old Testament to the Jews (Rom. 3:2 – “they were *entrusted* with the *oracles* of God”). Similarly, God worked to produce his word to the church in the New Testament text, ensuring his message was secured through scholarship and translation, even as human copying errors crept into copies.¹⁰ This same consideration concerns the gathering of the canon.

HUMAN AND DIVINE

The collection of Scriptures was never a production of God done in isolation from humanity. In our automated age, we are prone to expect God would run a universe where he dispenses all matters the way computers output information. If we were God, then we might have simply produced a Table of Contents out of thin air and told everyone to make sure his or her Bible followed it precisely. Perhaps we expect that God should have taken a person, possessed him or her in such a way that the person wrote out a Table of Contents while in some trance. In fact, we often seek God to act in that way in many aspects of life, not only in the

focus is too limited. Whether by negligence or intent, Ehrman has failed to consider all the possibilities by claiming there are only two options, neither of which is Biblical.

¹⁰ This subject has captured scholastic interest, and a number of really good solid works are available for those who wish to study it in depth. A number of these are cited in the footnotes. These works are much more highly commended than Ehrman’s popular works that seem to be written where shock value trumps scholastic fairness. In other words, if one wishes to study this subject more, then do so, with the best academic works available rather than those that seem to be written with a set agenda, written in tabloid-ese and missing genuine academic fairness.

production of Scripture. We often want a God who treats people like puppets, who pulls strings and produces results where the person has no choice in the matter.

Both Scripture and experience teach that, as a general rule, God does not work that way! That might seem like what we would do, but God is much greater than we are, his thoughts are beyond ours, and his ways are not our ways. One aspect of God's greatness is the way he is able to work through us, through our actions, and through our minds to effectuate his will, even as he lets us make choices. In this sense, Paul wrote of God at work in the "renewal of your mind" where *we*, by "testing," are able to "discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). He doesn't turn us into machines; he turns us into mature and thoughtful *believers* who trust him to work in us and through us for his good pleasure *while we* are working out our salvation:

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

This is the human and divine working in tandem. This is what a number of scholars miss.

A gold star example of this is the church's recognition of the canon, those writings that are not mere musings of man, not a collection of fairy tales or writings that support a power structure or economic agenda, but those writings that are divine revelation. These are the writings that convey God's will, which God has worked through humans to produce for the direction and edification of the church. While at times they are "hard to understand" and some who are "ignorant and unstable twist them to their own destruction," these are the Holy Writings that are able to make those who believe, "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:16-18).

We see a snapshot of this process when the early church faced the challenging issue of whether Gentiles had to first become Jews in order to become Christians. This was no small matter; it was monumental. The implications were deep and long lasting. They would determine whether Christianity was limited to a sect of Judaism or whether it went beyond that, whether it was a kingdom available to all peoples. This was an issue of great importance that God could have resolved with a little handwriting on the wall. God could have miraculously arranged the letters in a bowl of alphabet soup to produce the answer (granted, no one was likely *making* alphabet soup at the time, but the point is the same!). However, God did not. Luke recorded the arduous decision-making process in Acts 15.

The story started when Paul and Barnabas “had no small dissension and debate” with missionaries who were teaching the necessity of Jewish conversion before Christian conversion. Paul, Barnabas, and others went to Jerusalem to take the question to the church’s elders and apostles. The church was excited to greet Paul and the others, but when some Pharisees in the church heard the stories and issues, they sided with those who required circumcision and adherence to the law for the Gentiles. The apostles and elders gathered together “*to consider this matter*” (Acts 15:6). As important as this was and as high as the tension ran on the issue, it was still not something where the answer was dispensed in a magic manner from on high. Instead, there was “much debate” (Acts 15:7). The church engaged their mind, no doubt prayerfully, and did very much what Paul would later write to the Romans to do, “by testing determine what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect,” as referenced above.

At the Jerusalem conference, Peter ended the debate by reminding everyone what God had indicated through his prior work in the church. Paul and Barnabas added their experiences in the mission field, and James then turned to Scripture to add the “words of the prophets” (Acts 15:15). From this debate, discussion, examination of experience, and Scripture, James then announced his conclusion, that there were a few things that were important for the Gentiles, but not the requirement of becoming Jewish in circumcision and following all Jewish ceremonial law.

At this point, the Scripture is most illuminating in how God worked with his apostles in the early church to ensure that his word was properly set out for the church to follow. The process continued with the “renewed” minds at work! Luke tells us that “it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” to choose certain people to send with Paul and Barnabas back to the mission field. The Jerusalem conference also produced a letter for the church, setting out their position. The letter was from “the brothers, both the apostles and the elders” of the Jerusalem church. In the letter, the church did not run from the active involvement and united decision of the individuals. Neither did they see the individual dissension, debate, and ultimate conclusions something done merely by human effort. The letter makes the bold affirmation that the conclusions were those that “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). This is God at work in man. Not “divine or human” but “divine *and* human!” Not “A” or “B,” but “C” – all of the above!

This is a strong illustration of the premise often overlooked. Scripture, even the selection of the canon, is not *either* divine or human – it is *both*! It is the prayerful church dissenting, debating, reasoning, examining experience and Scripture, and finally finding agreement by those authorized and under the inspiration of the

Holy Spirit. An amazing way that God Almighty is able to work in and through humanity!

As we consider this process in the church, we begin by considering early church history.

SCRIPTURE AND THE EARLY CHURCH

The first history of the church that we have available today, is included in the Bible. We call it the Book of Acts. At the time Irenaeus (c.130-202) wrote *Against Heresies* (around 180), he used the term “the Acts of the Apostles.”¹¹ Acts was written sometime in the first century. Many scholars place its composition in the early sixties.¹² Others argue for a later date for Acts as written “around 85 CE or so.”¹³ Either way, Acts is the earliest history of the church and so we begin with it. Notably, Acts is not the choice because it supports the “spoils of a victor” in a theological debate about what Christ and the apostles taught. It is the choice because it is the first history, and not “barely,” but by many decades. It is the only history that was written at a time when eyewitnesses to many of the events would have still been living and available to challenge any liberties taken in the narrative or teaching. The relatively early date also means more readily available primary source material; *i.e.*, witnesses, documents, *etc.* were available.

1. *The Old Testament as Canon*

Acts relates the origin of the church as Pentecost, after the ascension of Christ (c.29-33AD). At Pentecost, which is clearly before any “New Testament” Scriptures were written, Peter quotes Joel to explain what was happening. Before quoting, Peter proclaimed the words were “uttered by the *prophet* Joel” (Acts 2:16). Peter invoked Joel as a “prophet” or mouthpiece of YHWH God. Inherent in this is a belief by Peter, and others, that God had delivered a message through what we now term “Old Testament prophets.” It was recognition that the prophetic writings were oracles of God. (Jesus himself saw the Old Testament as Scripture, and repeatedly referred to it as such in Matthew 15:3, 6; 22:31, *etc.* He taught as much to his followers, including the apostles.) Peter continued quoting

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.xiii.3.

¹² See arguments in Munck, Johannes, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (Doubleday 1967), at xlviif.

¹³ Ehrman, Bart, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible’s Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (Harper Collins 2011), at 208.

David as a “prophet” from the Psalms. He set out arguments from the Old Testament that verified what the people had already seen, that Jesus was nothing ordinary. The people had seen the “mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him,” and the Old Testament was filled prophetically with indications of Jesus and his role in God’s plans.

This earliest history of the church records Peter proclaiming that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.” He was “crucified and killed,” but death did not hold him. Unlike David, Jesus was raised physically from the dead, was witnessed by many after the resurrection, then he ascended to heaven and later he sent the Holy Spirit to his people. Peter was unequivocal; Jesus was both “Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). The church began as a mega-church! There were 3,000 added that first day.

As we follow church history, we see Peter and others continually using the Old Testament for authority in their teaching and preaching. The Old Testament was, in today’s terminology, a “Bible” for the New Testament church. This was not at a time before orthodox teachings about Christ either. With all due respect to Ehrman, these early Christians, from the most immediate beginnings of the church, were preaching a solid message of orthodoxy. They preached Jesus crucified, physically resurrected, and set to come again (Acts 3:17-21), as recorded in the oldest history of the church.

2. The Words of Jesus as Canon

Something else is clear from these early historical words. Peter used the Old Testament prophet Moses to point out that *Christ was also a prophet* raised up by God. Moses, Samuel, and the succeeding prophets foresaw and proclaimed the coming day of Jesus, not simply Messiah, but also prophet (Acts. 3:22-25). Moses was invoked for adding that Jesus was the one people were required to listen to and honor.

Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet... and it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people’ (Acts 3:22-23).

The apostles saw in Jesus, not only Messiah, but also prophet. Jesus was to be listened to. His words carried the words of God. He was God’s mouthpiece. His words carried the same authority and weight as the Old Testament. Of course, the apostles also saw the Old Testament as prophetic and the word of God, even before the death of Christ. This was something that, as followers of Jesus, they would have embraced from Jesus, even if nowhere else. Not only were Old Testament Scriptures seen as prophetic words of God, but the teachings of Jesus

were as well. Here we see the earliest outgrowth of Scripture or “canon” in the early church.

In Acts 20, we have Acts passing on Paul’s speech to the church at Ephesus. In that speech, Paul exhorted the Ephesians:

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

Later in his letters, Paul quoted or referenced the words of Jesus as binding authority (1 Cor. 7:10, 12; 9:14).

This is consistent with Peter referencing Jesus as the prophet Moses foresaw in Acts 2. Now at the historical time that Peter was speaking, we have no reason to think there were written records of Jesus’ words, but Peter and others who were witnesses were quick to teach people what they remembered (John would later record that Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit would help the people remember his words as well as understand them – John 14:26 “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”).

3. Apostolic Teaching as Canon

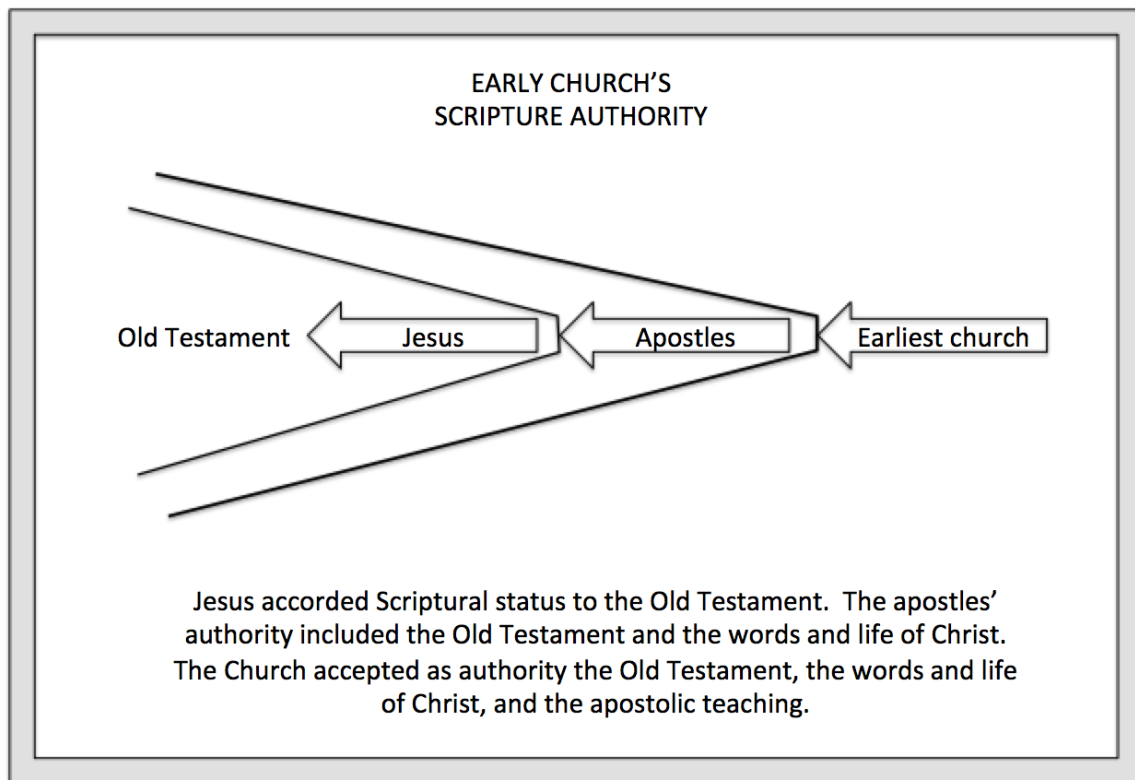
Peter, Philip, and Paul are all shown in Acts to have the Holy Spirit, and to be charged with proclaiming the word of God and the gospel of Christ. Each had notable opportunities and the history records many conversions into the church. The believers came into the church not only from the Old Testament and the teachings and events in the life of Christ, but also based on the apostolic teaching. This was teaching evidenced by working of otherwise unexplainable miracles, as well as by carefully articulated understanding of the Old Testament. So the earliest church had three sources of revelation from God: the Old Testament, the words of Jesus repeated by Holy Spirit-filled apostles, and the teachings of the apostles. The earliest church dedicated itself to that teaching (Acts 2:42).

Similarly, as referenced earlier in this chapter, when the early church faced a decision that was of paramount importance, and yet not directly covered by either the words of Scripture or Christ, the apostles and church set themselves to prayerfully consider the matter (Acts 15). In those circumstances, the apostles and church leaders took the following steps:

1. They began by stating their respective positions – “much debate” (Acts 15:6-7a).

2. They then reflected and acknowledged what God was already doing in their Holy Spirit-led, apostolic ministry (Acts 15:7-12).
3. They consulted Scripture, considering it authoritative (Acts 15:13-18).
4. They formed a conclusion consistent with the gospel and suited to their need (Acts 15:19-21).

Then, the church was able to inform the extended believers of the solution, knowing, and writing with confidence that the solution was not simply that of the apostolic church, but also of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:22-29). We see here the authority extending out from the teachings of the Old Testament, of Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, of his apostles to the church at large.



Consider the implications of the faith and practice of the earliest church, the church that was practicing Christian faith *before* they were even called Christians! It is from the earliest history that we have the earliest account of the earliest belief about Scripture. While this helps form a basis for understanding the scholastic concern on whether there was a consensus approach to authority of revelation in the earliest church, it does not address whether these teachings set forward orthodoxy that the church would or should follow.

CONCLUSION

I haven't found my last Bible yet, but I have found the authentic words of Scripture in many other editions! Do I miss my notes? Yes, of course! But my notes pale in comparison to the secure words of the Lord that I still have, thanks to God and the many in history who have worked to preserve those words!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen."* (Rom. 11:34-36)

God's Word has the very greatest authority of all authority, whether it is spoken or written. It had it in the days of Christ and his apostles. It still has the same authority today! Give it that place in your life, your home and your work.

2. *"And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures."* (2 Pet. 3:15-16)

Are there teachings of Jesus and His apostles that you have chosen not to hear and obey? How about His teaching on your heart, your money, your sexual purity?

3. *"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."* (Eph. 3:20-21)

No doubt God was at work, behind the scenes, in all the developments of the canon. Are you aware that He is still at work in your life today? Are you praying and believing that He will provide you with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3)? It may be years before you see His hand and know what He did or is doing. It may not be obvious in your lifetime in some matters, but there is no doubt He is at work.

HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-2:12. This week we add 1 John 2:13-14. We provide all verses below for your help!

1John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. **2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. **3** And by this we know

that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. **4**Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, **5** but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: **6** whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. **7** Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. **8** At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. **9** Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. **10** Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. **11** But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

12 I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

13 I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

14 I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **16** For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. **17** And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

18 Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. **19** They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. **20** But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.