

**Xenos Christian Fellowship
Christian Ministry Unit 2
Using Your Bible
Week 3 – Canonicity**

Editors' note:

- *Italics (lower case or ALL CAPS) show what students should write in their student outline.*
- **Bold (including bold italics and bold ALL CAPS) shows what appears in the student outline.**
- Regular text is used for lecture notes; ALL CAPS are used for emphasis.

Introduction

Consider this excerpt from the best-selling novel, *The DaVinci Code*, by **Dan Brown**.¹

Professor Teabing: “Everything you need to know about the Bible can be summed up by the great canon doctor Martyn Percy.” He cleared his throat and declared, “The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven.”

Sophie: “I beg your pardon?”

Teabing: “The Bible is a product of *man*, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book... More than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John among them.”

This kind of thinking represents one of the greatest challenges to the Christian faith we face today: the popular conception that the Bible is the creation of certain men wanting to promote their own theological perspective at the expense of other, equally valid perspectives present in the first and second century world.

Arguing from this perspective, **Elaine Pagels** says:

“We now begin to see that what we call Christianity...actually represents only a small selection of specific sources, chosen from among dozens of others.”²

¹ Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code* (New York, New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 231.

² Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1989) p. xxxv. Pagels is a professor of Religion at Princeton University.

Pagels' implication is clear: the version of Christianity depicted in our Bibles reflects the ideology of the winners, who suppressed alternative and equally credible versions of Christian spirituality.

“The concerns of Gnostic³ Christians survived only as a suppressed current, like a river driven underground.”⁴

These views raise important questions for Christians who believe that God has revealed his Word in the 66 books of the Bible: Who determined which books should be included? Why do we have the books that we have?

As Christian workers you should be able to defend the validity of the canon of scripture when people question it. Learn this material so you won't be caught without an answer to questions people often raise on this issue.

Canonicity

Definition: Canonicity is the study of the *recognition and acceptance of the books that belong in the Bible.*

“Canon” comes from a Greek word that denotes a “measuring rod” or ruler. “The Canon” is the standard set of books that are accepted into our Bible and viewed as inspired by God.

In our discussion of canonicity, we will explore how Jews and early Christians came to recognize and accept the inspiration of the books that are now in our Bible. The formation of the canon is a complicated topic—we certainly can't do justice to it in a three-hour lecture. We have provided extensive footnotes so you can read more about this topic on your own.

Why does this matter?

If humans determined which books should be included based on their own preferences, then Pagels and others are right: the Bible is a product of men and reflects their biases, outlook, etc. But if God gave us clear, objective criteria by which we can recognize his inspired books, then we have additional reasons (see week 2 of Christian Ministry Unit 2) to believe that the Bible truly is communication from God that reflects what he wants to say.

³ “The designation Gnosticism, derived from the Greek *gnostikos* (one who has *gnosis*, or “secret knowledge”), is a term of modern scholarship. Evidence for the Gnostic phenomenon, found in the Church Fathers who opposed Gnostic teachings (Irenaeus, c. 185; Hippolytus, c. 230; Epiphanius, c. 375) and in the Gnostic writings themselves, reveals a diversity in theology, ethics, and ritual that defies strict classification. Yet Gnostic sects appear to have shared an emphasis on the redemptive power of esoteric knowledge, acquired not by learning or empirical observation but by divine revelation.”- *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (New York, New York: Vintage Books, 1989) p. 150.

In this lecture we will address several questions that skeptics often ask:

- Did men decide which books should be included in the Bible? Was it just a power play by the ‘orthodox’ to get their way and marginalize ‘alternative’ views?
- Was it just the books that were oldest that were gradually revered as scripture?
- Why is there disagreement among Christian groups about which books should be included in the Bible? Why, for example, does the Catholic Bible contain a section called the “Apocrypha” not included in Protestant Bibles?
- What about other ancient books that record Jesus’ teachings like the Gospel of Thomas? On what grounds are they excluded from the Bible?

Unless we are able to answer questions like the ones above, our confidence in the Bible will be eroded and we won’t be able to effectively defend it to others (1 Peter 3:15). If the integrity of the canon is in doubt, the authority of God’s Word is diluted and corrupted. And if we can’t trust the Bible, where can we turn for reliable information about who God is?

Our approach

We will argue that divine inspiration, not human decision, determined which books were included.

(Geisler & Nix) “God gives divine authority to a book and men of God receive it. God reveals and His people recognize what He reveals. *Canonicity is determined by God and discovered by man.*”⁵

God did not leave the determination of the canon up to the subjective feelings of human beings. He provided a clear way for men to recognize which books were inspired.

The primary test was authorship: books written by inspired authors were included in the canon. Books written by or under the direction of PROPHETS were accepted as inspired in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, books had to be written by or under the direction of an APOSTLE. Based on this clear, objective criteria, the books of the Bible we have today were recognized and accepted as canonical.

How were the books of the Old Testament selected?

1. The Antiquity Theory

(Stephen L. Harris) “As centuries passed, Israel’s legal and prophetic writings grew ever more venerable and were quoted, debated, and read publically in the synagogues until familiarity with their teaching and their

⁵ Geisler & Nix, *From God to Man: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1974) p. 66.

recognized consistency with the Mosaic tradition made them by use and habit part of the Hebrew Bible.”⁶

Problems with this view:

A. The Old Testament itself suggests that its books were accepted *as they were written*.

- Moses told the Israelites to place the book of the Law beside the Ark (Deut. 31:24-26) and were warned not to add to it (Deut. 4:2).⁷
- Joshua received Moses’ writing as scripture (Joshua 1:7,8).
- Joshua commended his own writings to the people of Israel as scripture (Joshua 24:26).
- Samuel commended his writings to the people as scripture (1 Sam. 10:25).
- Micah, who was a contemporary of Isaiah, accepted Isaiah’s words as scripture (compare Micah 4:1-4 with Isaiah 2:2-4).
- Jeremiah regarded Micah’s writings (125 years earlier) as being from God (Jer. 26:18).
- Daniel, writing around 537 BC, accepts Jeremiah’s writings (627-585 BC) as scripture (Daniel 9:2). Notice also the clear implication that a collection of inspired “books” already exists.
- Old Testament authors knew and the Jews understood that Moses and the prophets that followed him were receiving revelation directly from God (re. David: 2 Sam. 23:2-3; re. Moses: Ex. 31:8; 34:1). “Thus says the Lord” appears almost 500 times in the writing prophets.⁸

B. The Old Testament authors were aware of many ancient writings that they *did not revere as scripture*.

Joshua and Samuel quote *The Book of Jashar* (Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:8) and Moses quotes *The Book of the Wars of the Lord* (Numbers 21:14), both clearly very ancient texts, but neither was accepted into the Hebrew canon. Dozens of similar examples could be cited. If a book was very old and well respected, that alone was not sufficient for inclusion.

Liberal commentators claim that the book of Daniel was written no earlier than 165 B.C., but all must agree that it was seen as inspired by 110 B.C.⁹

⁶ Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible* (Palo Alto, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1985), p. 9.

⁷ On additions to Deuteronomy that narrate the death of Moses, see Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 21-22.

⁸ Kaiser says 5000 times, which must be a mistake. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹ “In the second column of the 4Q Florilegium a passage of Daniel is quoted like passages from any other biblical prophet, with the expression ‘as it is written in the book of Daniel the prophet,’ the doubts about its canonicity have

This would mean Daniel reached canonical status in just 50 years! Meanwhile, “a very worthy book like Ecclesiasticus, similar to Scripture in subject matter and also written in Hebrew, and dated about 180 B.C. was not accepted into the Hebrew canon.”¹⁰

Conclusion: *The evidence simply does not support the notion that Old Testament books were accepted because of their age or widespread use. Internal evidence also shows that people knew immediately that these books were scripture, as they were written, and needed no pronouncement from leadership bodies.*

2. Our view: The books of the Old Testament were accepted as they were written based on objective criteria: prophetic authorship.

What is a prophet?

During Old Testament times, God inspired the prophets as his official spokesmen. They wrote and spoke on God’s behalf. Famous examples include Moses, Isaiah, and Elijah.

How did the Jews determine who was and was not a prophet?

In Deuteronomy 18:9-12, the prophet Moses warned the Jews not to turn to diviners, sorcerers, etc. for direction. Instead, God would raise up a succession of prophets after him (vs. 15,18) who would speak to them on behalf of God (Jer. 7:25). As Moses predicted, God raised up one prophet after another for almost 1000 years, from Moses (1400 BC) to Malachi (400 BC).

To prepare them for his departure, Moses gave the Israelites two ways to identify a true prophet:

Test #1: accurate short-range predictions

(Deut. 18:18-22) "I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And it shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him. But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die." "And you may say in your

been generally abandoned.” Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986) p. 78.

¹⁰ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Greenville, South Carolina: A Press, 1996), pp. 154-155.

heart, 'How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' "*When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.*"

Deuteronomy 18:15-22 requires that prophets validate their claims by giving short-range, detailed predictions (implied in v. 22). The penalty for any inaccuracy in these predictions was death. Many subsequent passages show that the Israelites applied this test.

(1 Samuel 3:19,20) "Thus Samuel grew and the LORD was with him and *let none of his words fail*. And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was *confirmed* as a prophet of the LORD."

(Jeremiah 28:9) "The prophet who prophesies of peace, when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then that prophet will be known as one whom the LORD has truly sent."

(Ezekiel 33:33) "So when it comes to pass—as surely it will—then they will know that a prophet has been in their midst."

See also Jeremiah 44:29,30.

Test #2: *The message of a true prophet must agree with previous revelation*

(Deuteronomy 13:1-5) "If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God who

brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you."

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 states that in addition to accurate prediction of future events, a prophets' theological and ethical teaching must also agree with prior revelation.

Because God safeguarded his revelation through these two tests, God held the Israelites culpable for following false prophets and their gods (see Isaiah 41:21-29; 44:24-28; 45:20,21; 46:5-11; 48:1-8).

How can we be sure that prophetic authorship was the criteria used for including books in the Old Testament?

A. External evidence

Ancient witnesses outside of the Old Testament indicate that prophetic authorship was the criteria for including a book in the Old Testament.

Josephus:

"From Artexerxes to our own time the complete history has been written but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets."¹¹

Josephus indicates that there was an unbroken "succession of the prophets" from Moses to Malachi. Books written after their time were not seen as inspired because they weren't written by prophets. This is a clear indication that books must be authored by a prophet to be accepted into the Old Testament canon.

The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS): The Dead Sea Scrolls refer to the canonical books of the Old Testament as "the Law and the Prophets" or "Moses and the Prophets." Since Moses himself was seen as a prophet, this is further evidence that ancient Jews saw the entire Old Testament as the work of

¹¹ Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, book 1, paragraph 8.

prophets and used this criteria for including some books and rejecting others.

B. Internal Evidence

If prophetic authorship was the criteria for accepting Old Testament books, we would expect to find an awareness, on the part of the Old Testament authors and their contemporaries, that they were prophets. When we take a closer look, that's exactly what we find:

1. Moses wrote the Pentateuch (Exodus 17:14; 24:4-7; 34:27; Deuteronomy 31:9,22,24; Ezra 7:6; Psalm 103:7; Joshua 8:31, 23:6; 1 Kings 2:3).

2. The Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), except for Daniel, identify themselves as prophets. They stated that they were ordered to write (Jeremiah 30:2; Ezekiel 43:11; Isaiah 8:1) because they were aware that they were communicating revelation. This would account for the books by their names plus Lamentations (by Jeremiah).

3. Each of the 12 Minor Prophets identify themselves as prophets.

4. 1st and 2nd Samuel, and 1st and 2nd Kings were written by prophets (1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 20:34; 32:32; 33:19).

5. Joshua (Joshua 1:1; 5:13-15), Solomon (1 Kings 3:5ff.), and Daniel (Daniel 7:1) all received revelation from God, either directly or through dreams and visions, which squares with God's description of a prophet (Deuteronomy 13:1; Numbers 12:6-8). Joshua was the first fulfillment of God's promise in Deuteronomy 18:15 to raise up another prophet after Moses. This accounts for Joshua, Daniel, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

6. David and Asaph, the two main authors of the Psalms, are identified as prophets in Nehemiah 12:24,36 ("David the man of God") and 2 Chronicles 29:30 ("Asaph the seer"). Peter also called David a prophet (Acts 2:30).

Only Judges, Ruth, Chronicles, Job, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther lack internal evidence for prophetic authorship. But external evidence that prophetic authorship was the criteria

used suggests that the authors of these books were included in the Hebrew canon because they were written by prophets.

This conclusion is further supported by the fact that New Testament authors understood the entire Old Testament as being written by prophets.

1. Jesus often referred to the entire Old Testament as “the Law (written by Moses the prophet) and the Prophets” (Mt. 7:12; Mt. 22:40; Luke 16:16 “the Law and the prophets were proclaimed until John”).

2. Paul described the entire Old Testament as being written by prophets:

(Romans 16:25) “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, 26 but now is manifested, and by the *Scriptures of the prophets*, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith...”

In Romans 3:21, Paul echoes Jesus’ language and says the righteousness of God has been revealed in “the law and the prophets.”

Conclusion: We have argued that the books of the Old Testament were not chosen arbitrarily by a group of powerful men. Nor were they accepted merely because of their antiquity. Through short-term prophecy and doctrinal fidelity with previous prophets, the Jews could confirm who was and wasn’t a prophet. When they recognized that a book had been authored by a prophet, they immediately included the book in their canon of scripture. This is why we say that the Jews *had a clear, objective way to recognize which books to include*. This is why the Apocrypha should not be considered part of the Bible (see handout on “The Apocrypha”). The Apocrypha does not claim to be authored by prophets.

How were the books of the New Testament selected?

1. Dan Brown’s view¹² in *The DaVinci Code*:

¹² Some may object that we are reacting to a work of fiction, but in an interview with Charles Gibson on *Good Morning America*, Dan Brown said that he accepts the theory about Mary Magdalene that the book is based on. See Hank Hannegraff & Paul L. Maier, *The DaVinci Code: Fact or Fiction* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) p. 71, footnote 8.

Powerful men, for self-serving reasons, determined which books should be accepted *long after they were written*.

“Because Constantine upgraded Jesus’ status almost four centuries after Jesus’ death, thousands of documents already existed chronicling His life as a mortal man. To rewrite the history books, Constantine knew he would need a bold stroke. From this sprang the most profound moment in Christian history....Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ’s human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.”¹³

Problems with this view.

A. New Testament authors expected their readers to immediately receive their letters as revelation from God.

(1 Cor. 14:37) 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.

Paul knew his writings were scripture, and that his audience was aware of this as well.

(1 Thes. 2:13) And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

(1 John 1:4,5) And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. 5 And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you...

B. The apostles accepted other New Testament writings as scripture, thus showing that, just like the Old Testament, believers knew *immediately* that these books were scripture.

(2 Peter 3:15,16) “...just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, 16 as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught

¹³ Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code* (New York, New York: Doubleday, 2003) p. 235.

and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures...”

Peter clearly implies that Paul’s writings were part of scripture.

(1 Tim. 5:18) “For the Scripture says, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’”

In this verse, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 and calls them both “scripture,” showing that he viewed Luke’s gospel as being equal in status with Deuteronomy.

C. Early on, apostolic letters were read and circulated as scripture. These quotes are important because they show that long before any church councils, the church was well aware that these texts were scripture.

Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (70 – 155 A.D.):

Quoting Psalm 4:5 and Ephesians 4:26: “As it is said in these *scriptures*, ‘Be ye angry and sin not’ and ‘let not the sun go down upon your wrath.’”¹⁴

Writing to the church at Ephesus about Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, which they still possessed: “For neither I, nor any other such one, can come up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul. He, when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth... And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter, which, if you carefully study, you will find the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you.”¹⁵

So the books were immediately accepted as revelation in each locale where they were written. As copies of letters were passed around, churches gathered them into growing collections of authoritative apostolic writings.

D. By the 2nd Century A.D., there was widespread agreement about most of the New Testament books.

By the middle of the second century, most churches were

¹⁴ Polycarp, *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, chapter 12.

¹⁵ Polycarp, *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians*, chapter 3.

using our 4 gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, 1 Peter, and 1 John.

(Bruce Metzger) “What is really remarkable is that, though the fringes of the New Testament canon remained unsettled, a high degree of unanimity concerning the greater part of the New Testament canon was attained within the first two centuries among the very diverse and scattered congregations not only in the Mediterranean world, but also over an area extending from Britain to Mesopotamia.”¹⁶

The claim in *The DaVinci Code* that there was no agreement on which gospels were inspired prior to the council of Nicea (325 A.D.) is untrue. We have three canonical lists prior to Nicea dating as far back as 180 A.D. that accept our four gospels *and* exclude all others. Those who accepted pseudepigraphal books as real were splinter groups and Gnostics. Just as Mormons accept other books as scripture today, that hardly suggests the rest of us are confused and not sure what to accept. Everyone knows their book was written much later and has no authority, just as early Christians knew the pseudepigraphal books were written long after Christ.

So why did church councils discuss which books should be included?

While the writings contained in the New Testament were recognized as scripture immediately within the churches that received them, it took time for some of these letters to circulate more widely and to be recognized universally. This was due to the wide geographic separation between early churches. Although recipients of letters in one part of the empire knew their book was from Paul or Peter, those in distant lands had no way to know except the word of the believers from those cities, and the content of the books.

During this time, heretical writings purporting to be written by various “apostles” also made it necessary to identify which letters were apostolic and which were not, and the leaders wanted to clearly declare, once and for all which books were known to be phony.

(Bruce Metzger) “When, toward the close of the fourth century, church synods and councils began to issue pronouncements concerning the New Testament canon, they were merely ratifying the judgment of individual Christians throughout the church... In the

¹⁶ Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content*, Third Edition (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 317-318. Metzger is a widely respected professor at Princeton Theological Seminary who specializes in studying ancient documents related to the New Testament.

most basic sense, neither individuals nor councils created the canon; instead they came to recognize and acknowledge the self-authenticating quality of these writings, which imposed themselves as canonical upon the church.”¹⁷ In other words, councils did not *create* the canon, they merely endorsed and certified the canon that already existed.

Should we be suspicious of books that took a long time to be universally recognized?

Some New Testament books like 2 Peter, James, Hebrews, and Revelation did take a long time to be widely accepted. But Bruce Metzger points out, “that just shows how careful the early church was... they weren’t ‘gung ho,’ sweeping in every last document that happened to have anything about Jesus in it.”¹⁸ In these cases, either authorship was doubted by those living far from the original recipients, or the authorship was questioned because of the content in the book or a variation in writing style due to the use of an amanuensis, or helper.

2. Our view: The books of the New Testament were accepted as they were written based on objective criteria: *Apostolic authorship*.

Debates in the early church about which books to include involved many issues including authorship, doctrinal content, and how widely a book was used in various churches. But far and away, and from the earliest times, the dominant criteria used for determining whether a book should be in the canon was whether it was written by or under the direction of an apostle.

Apostolic authorship in the New Testament corresponds to prophetic authorship in the Old Testament.

What is an apostle?

The word “apostle” literally means “messenger” or “ambassador.” Sometimes the word is used in the New Testament generically (2 Cor. 8:23). More often, the New Testament uses this word to refer to Jesus’ official and inspired spokespersons, who saw the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 9:1; Acts 1:22) and were commissioned by Him as apostles.

The apostles included Jesus’ twelve disciples (with Matthias replacing Judas) along with James (the half-brother of Jesus), and Paul. Paul declares that he was the last person to see the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:9), implying that he was the last apostle chosen by Jesus.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 318.

¹⁸ Bruce Metzger quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998) p. 68.

How can we be sure that apostolic authorship was the criteria used for including books in the New Testament?

A. Jesus authorized the apostles as his official spokesmen, which included the authority to write scripture (see Matthew 10:40; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13).

B. From the beginning of the church, the Apostles were seen as the source of authoritative teaching.

(Acts 2:42) And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-16:4): When a dispute arose in the early church about the way Gentiles should relate to Jewish laws and customs, the matter was taken to the apostles for a decision. They wrote down their verdict in an authoritative letter that was distributed to all of the churches.

(Ephesians 3:4) And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy *apostles and prophets* in the Spirit..."

(2 Peter 3:1) This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, 2 that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior *spoken by your apostles*.

C. Leaders in the early church perceived the New Testament as the work of the Apostles.

Polycarp (70 – 155 A.D), bishop of Smyrna: From his letter to the Philippians: "So then 'let us serve him [Christ] with fear and all reverence', as he himself commanded us, as did the *apostles*, who preached the gospel to us, and the *prophets*, who proclaimed beforehand the coming of our Lord" (Polycarp to the Philippians 6:3).

Polycarp saw the apostles as being on par with the prophets of

old. Together they have produced God's revelation to us.

Irenaeus (130 – 202 A.D.): After charging a heretical group with distorting scripture to support their own position, Irenaeus says, “Such then is their system, which neither the *prophets announced*, nor the *Lord taught*, or the *apostles delivered*, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures...”¹⁹

Notice that Irenaeus refers to the entirety of scripture as the words of the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles.

The Muratorian Fragment (170 A.D.): This ancient document contains a discussion about which books should be included in the Bible. In this section, notice the reasoning the author uses to reject a book called *The Shepherd of Hermas*: “But the Shepherd was written by Hermas in the city of Rome quite recently, in our own times, when his brother Pius occupied the bishop's chair in the church of the city of Rome; and therefore it may be read indeed, but cannot be given out to the people in church either among *the prophets*, since their number is complete, or among *the apostles* for it is after [their] time.”²⁰

Like Polycarp and Irenaeus, the author refers to existing revelation as “the prophets” and “the apostles.” He also excludes *The Shepherd of Hermas* from the Canon because it was too recent to have been written during the lifetime of the apostles.

D. Heretics often distributed their own books under the name of an apostle, implying that apostolic authorship was a known criteria for accepting books into the canon.

(2 Corinthians 11:12,13) But what I am doing, I will continue to do, that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting. 13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

Eusebius (275 – 339 A.D.): Discussing how heretics distribute their own writings under the name of an apostle, Eusebius says, “we have... been obliged to make a list of [disputed

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 1, chapter 8, paragraph 1.

²⁰ *The Muratorian Fragment*, lines 73-80.

books], distinguishing between those writings which... are true, genuine, and recognized, and those which differ from them in that they are not canonical but disputed, yet nevertheless are known to most of the writers of the church, in order that we might know them and the writings which are put forward by heretics under the name of the apostles containing gospels such as those of Peter, and Thomas, and Matthias, and some others besides or Acts such as those of Andrew and John and the other apostles.”²¹

E. We can connect the authorship of *every* New Testament book to an apostle.

As with the Old Testament, if apostolic authorship was the criteria for accepting a book into the New Testament, we would expect many of the New Testament authors to identify themselves as apostles. That is exactly what we find.

- The thirteen letters of Paul all indicate that he is the author. Although the Pauline authorship of some of these letters has been challenged by some modern scholars, there is good evidence that all the letters we have are authentic.²²
- The gospel of John indicates that the author is one of Jesus' original disciples (John 21:23,24).
- The three epistles of John are identical to the gospel in style. 1 John also claims to be written by an eye-witness of Jesus (1 John 1:1).
- Revelation claims to have been written by John (Revelation 1:4,9).
- Both 1 Peter and 2 Peter claim Petrine authorship (1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; 3:1).

The remaining books have no internal reference to an apostolic author, but in every case they have strong historic ties to an apostle.

- **Matthew:** Early church writings state that the apostle Matthew wrote the gospel named for him.

Papias (140 AD) states that "Matthew composed the oracles in Hebrew, and each

²¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3, chapter 25, paragraphs 6 & 7.

²² For more detail on the disputed authorship of some New Testament epistles, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1970).

one interpreted them as he was able."²³

Irenaeus (180-192 AD) states: "Matthew, among the Hebrews in their own dialect, brought out also a gospel while Peter and Paul in Rome were preaching and founding the church."²⁴

- **Mark: John Mark was Peter's *amenuensis* – an understudy who researches or writes under supervision. Paul and Peter both used *amenuenses* in some of their letters. (See Tertius in Rom. 16:22 and Silvanus in 1 Pet. 5:12; Paul also implies that he used *amenuenses* in Gal. 6:11 and 2 Thess. 3:17.)**

Papias said that "Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote accurately all that he remembered..."²⁵

Irenaeus says that "Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, also himself committed to us inscripturated the things being preached by Peter."²⁶

Tertullian (200 AD) also states: "...that (gospel) which Mark had published may be affirmed to be Peter's, whose interpreter Mark was."²⁷

- **Luke: Luke functioned as Paul's *amenuensis*.**

Irenaeus said of the gospel of Luke: "... Luke, the follower of Paul, the gospel being preached by that one (Paul) he put down in a book."²⁸

Origen says that Luke, "composed for

²³ Eusebius, *Penguin Classics: Eusebius, The History of the Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 152.

²⁴ Eusebius, *Penguin Classics: Eusebius, The History of the Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 210.

²⁵ Eusebius, *Penguin Classics: Eusebius, The History of the Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 152.

²⁶ Eusebius, *Penguin Classics: Eusebius, The History of the Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 210.

²⁷ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 4, chapter 5, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ed., (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980) vol. 3, p. 350.

²⁸ Eusebius, *Penguin Classics: Eusebius, The History of the Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 210,211.

Gentile converts...the Gospel commended by Paul.”²⁹

Tertullian called it “Paul's gospel written by Luke.”³⁰

It is also clear that *Luke* and *Acts* have the same author.³¹

- **Hebrews: Hebrews is of uncertain authorship, although it is theologically and conceptually connected with Paul. At the same time, the grammar and vocabulary are quite different from Paul's other books. Two options are possible:**

1. Clement of Rome (quoted by Eusebius) said that "the epistle to the Hebrews is Paul's,"³² originally written in the Hebrew dialect but later translated by Luke into Greek for use among Greek Christians. This would account for the obvious difference in vocabulary and style between Hebrews and Paul's letters.

2. One of Paul's companions may have written it under his supervision, possibly Timothy (see Hebrews 13:23). Barnabas (a Levite) and Apollos are also possibilities. This would explain the difference in style and vocabulary, as well as the author's third-person reference to the apostles in Hebrews 2:3,4.

Aside: Don't miss another important point about all of the quotes above – they again show that leaders in the early church were very concerned about the issue of apostolic authorship.

- **James: There were three apostles named James—James the son of Zebedee, James the son of Alphaeus, and James, the half-brother of Christ who was designated as an apostle after Jesus' resurrection. Herod had James the son of Zebedee “put to death by the sword” (Acts 12:2) probably in 44 A.D., making it unlikely that he wrote this letter. Most**

²⁹ From Origen's *Commentary on Matthew*, preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 6, chapter 25, paragraph 6.

³⁰ Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 4, chapter 5. See Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), vol. 3, p. 350.

³¹ See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1970) pp. 100-101.

³² Eusebius: *Ecclesiastical History*, VI. 14.

commentators attribute this epistle to Jesus' half brother James.

- **Jude:** This author calls himself “the brother of James,” suggesting that his brother was well known. The best known James at this time was Jesus' half-brother James, the apostle and leader of the church in Jerusalem. Jesus had another half-brother named Jude and two others: Joseph and Simon (Matt. 13:55). All four brothers became followers of Christ after his resurrection (Acts 1:14,15). There is some evidence that Jesus' brothers were regarded as apostles (see 1 Cor. 9:5). And Harris points out “If James had disbelieved his half-brother at first (John 7:5) but became an early believer and distinguished leader after having seen the risen Christ, it is only a small step to think that his brother Jude was also accepted as a special apostle...”³³ The other possibility is that Jude the apostle (one of the original twelve and likely brother of James, son of Alphaeus) wrote this letter. In either case, the notion that this letter has apostolic origins is further supported by Tertullian's (155-230 A.D.) reference to the author as “the Apostle Jude.”³⁴

Conclusion: The church did not create or determine the New Testament canon based on personal theological preferences. From the beginning, the early church recognized the teaching and writing of the Apostles as inspired. Their letters were written and received as scripture. Apostolic authorship was the known criteria for inclusion in the canon. This is the main reason why other so-called “gospels” and “letters” were excluded from the New Testament canon (see handout on “The Apocrypha & New Testament Pseudepigraphical Books”).

(R. Laird Harris) “We need speak of no strong intuition of the early church, as does Westcott, whereby these holy writings were distinguished from others. It was not an intuition: It was simple obedience to the known commands of Christ and his apostles.”³⁵

(F. F. Bruce) “What is particularly important to notice is that the New Testament canon was not demarcated by the arbitrary decree of any church council. When at last a church council—the Synod of Hippo in AD 393—listed the 27 books of the New

³³ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures* (Greenville, South Carolina: A Press, 1996), p. 273.

³⁴ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, book 1, chapter 3.

³⁵ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures* (Greenville, South Carolina: A Press, 1996) p. 246.

Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.”³⁶

Overall Conclusion

Books today recognized as scripture DID NOT receive that status centuries after the original writing. Old and New Testament writings were recognized as scripture by the generation living at the time of composition. This was done through recognition of prophetic or apostolic authorship.

The scriptures WERE NOT formed by men at councils. Councils only officially recognized what was already accepted as canonical.

God gave Jews and early Christians OBJECTIVE criteria by which they could recognize inspired books. The composition of our Bibles reflects the will of God, not the decisions of men.

We can trust that God has overseen the production and compilation of his Word! It has survived every attack and will continue to endure.

Memory Verses (NONE)

Assignment

Read chapter 7 of *Reading the Bible with Heart & Mind* and write one-paragraph summary of the chapter.

Write out your meditation on 2 Cor. 4:16-5:6 as explained in class.

³⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (London, England: Pickering and Inglis, 1971) pp. 112,113.