**The Canon of Scripture, No. 3 – BD44-02**

So we pick up the story this morning of the canon of Scripture. We have found that the Jewish Old Testament canon had 39 books arranged into 24 books. We found that there were no books written after 424 B. C. with the book of Malachi, and then the line of prophets ceased in Israel. Because there were no prophets, there could be no further Scripture. For this reason, the Jews reject the Apocrypha which were written between the Old and New Testament period—that period of about 400 years when there was no prophet in Israel. These are viewed as non-canonical by the Jews, and they had been rejected by Christian leaders all down the centuries until the Council of Trent in 1546 when the Roman Catholic Church, in spite of its past tradition relative to rejecting the Apocrypha, at this council they declared that the Apocrypha were canonical books, primarily to justify certain doctrines which were under attack by the Protestant reformers which could only be based upon apocryphal writings. Jesus Christ and the apostles rejected the Apocrypha as is evident by the fact that they never quoted from them.

The New Testament completes the revelation of the Old Testament, and the New Testament has in many ways a more direct importance to us as Christians today than the Old Testament. For this reason the canonicity of the New Testament is even more important to us than the canonicity of the Old Testament. How did we get these 27 books? Why these alone when there were other writings that existed at the time? The fact is that these writings came by a certain historical process us, so that God was moving in normal procedures to identify for us that which became the New Testament Scriptures. Some good New Testament literature was excluded from the New Testament canon. That therefore is the question—Why? Why these books and no others.

**Apostolicity**

All of our New Testament books were written by the year 100, and these alone are accepted by groups in Christendom today as being canonical. Here is the basis upon which the canon of the New Testament was selected. First of all was apostolicity. Apostolicity means that the book had to be written by an apostle’s authority. 2 Peter 3:2 equates for us the writings of the New Testament apostles with the authority of the Old Testament prophets so that the apostles in the New Testament bore the same kind of divine authority contact with God that the prophets of the Old Testament did. Peter says, “That ye may be mindful of the words that were spoken before by the holy prophets (the Old Testament) and by the commandments of us (the apostles) of the Lord and Savior.”

**Apostolic Authority**

After the apostles passed off the scene, there was no one else left with this kind of authority. You had the same condition as when the prophets passed off after Malachi. There was no one who could write Scripture. Once the last of the apostles had died, there was no one who could write Scripture. Apostolicity was an absolute requirement for a book to be Scripture. There is no such thing as apostolic succession which some churches like to pretend today, that they have apostles in their church today as a result of this gift being passed on from one apostle to the next through the centuries. This is not the case.

**Acceptance by the Churches**

The acceptance by the Churches is the second basis: The general acceptance by the New Testament churches of a book as having the authority of an apostle, thus as being inspired, thus as being the very Word of God. This was indicated by the fact that these books would be read publicly in the worship services.

**Quoted by the Church Fathers**

A third basis was the fact that they were quoted by the church fathers in their writings. Therefore, these men indicated that they had been received as Scripture.

**Consistent With Apostolic Doctrine**

A fourth requirement was that they were consistent with apostolic doctrine. They would obviously not accept a book that contradicted with what the apostles had taught, and that was the problem with the Apocrypha.

**Edification**

The fifth requirement was that the books proved to be edifying to the believers.

**The Holy Spirit**

The last one, number six, is that there was the internal conviction of the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of the believers that they were reading in these New Testament books the very Word of God.

Now the most important one of these six is number one—apostolicity. These others are comparatively secondary. They contribute, but unless a book had the authority of an apostle behind it, it could never enter the canon. Consequently, the New Testament was not the result of 27 books being selected from a much larger volume of literature which had gained recognition. They did not sit down and say, “Now look, we have all these inspired books. Why don’t we put together a New Testament, and we’ll take this one here, this would be good, this is a good one. OK, we’ll take these 27 and we’ll throw away the rest of these inspired writings.” It did not come that way. As each writing came on the scene, it immediately went through the process of being recognized as a book inspired and there a book of Scripture.

Some New Testament books were immediately and extensively accepted. Others would be accepted in some places and finally rejected. Others, some of the smaller books, took longer before they were finally completely accepted. The last book to get in was 2 Peter. 2 Peter had to really hustle right down to the line before it passed the rigid tests that were applied to Scripture.

**Ignatius**

We looked at the history of the New Testament. Just to touch on this for a moment, we found that there was a certain development in the first two centuries. In the first century, A. D., we found that the New Testament writers were aware of the fact that they wrote with divine authority and that they were to be listened to (Galatians 1:8-9). The first orthodox writer to quote a New Testament book in this first century was the writer of a book called The Epistle of Barnabas. He quotes Matthew 20:16 as Scripture. A church father in this first century was a man named Ignatius who was Bishop of Antioch. He was martyred sometime before the year 117 A. D. His writings clearly indicate that he was acquainted with our New Testament in general. This was before the year 100 A. D. The writings of Ignatius already indicate a general acquaintance with the New Testament books. He would not have been perhaps too well acquainted possibly with Revelation which didn’t get written until near the end of the first century.

Coming to the 2nd century, we have several lines of confirmation. We have the writings of several church fathers. They indicate almost complete acquaintance with all of the New Testament books. At least these books were extensively recognized and known and treated as Scripture. In this period we also had heretics. Heretics quoted from New Testament books in order to prove their heresy. Obviously, if they were going to argue against Christians to try to convince Christians of their point of view, they were going to use the books of authority, the books that Christians considered authoritative in order to try to prove their point. So from the writings of the heretics, we see what they quoted—what books they quoted from. Thus we have a clue as to what books immediately were being recognized as New Testament Scripture. Some of the big name heretics were Basilides, Marcion, Valentinus, and Heracleon.

We mentioned that Muratorian Fragment which was a copy of a list of the canon of Scripture made in 170 A. D. In it we found all of our New Testament included except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter. These, many scholars believe, were omitted because of a possible break in the manuscript at that point.

Then we have the evidence of certain translations. By the year 150 A. D., the New Testament was translated into Syriac, into what we have referred to as the Peshitta version. This was from the eastern end of the Roman Empire. The Peshitta omitted only 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation. In other words, this translation had 22 of our New Testament books as Scripture by the year 150 A. D. Also the old Latin translation came from the extreme western end of the Roman Empire which indicated to us what the western church considered to be New Testament Scripture. The old Latin version omits 2 Peter, James, and Hebrews. It include 24 of our New Testament books. Between these two versions, the only book omitted was 2 Peter, the one that had the hardest time getting into the canon. Between the eastern end of the empire and the western end of the empire, of the books that were considered canonical, only 2 Peter was left out. All other 26 books were fully recognized and fully accepted.

So in the second century, the churches had begun to gather together the recognized individual New Testament books and make them one book, that which we call our New Testament today.

**Origin**

Now in the third century, the development begins to pick up steam. This is the period, along with the 4th century, when the canon is finally formally recognized (the New Testament books) and crystalized. I want to mention a few of the great names of the church leaders in this period that gave us some indication from whom we draw conclusions concerning the attitude of the Christians toward the New Testament. One big name was a man named Origin. He lived from 185 to 254 A. D. Origin was the greatest scholar of his day. The 3rd century was the century of Origin. He was a teacher. He was an exegete. He was a communicator. He was a textual critic. He wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Old and New Testament, and he traveled extensively. That’s the valuable thing to us about Origin, among many other things, is that he was a traveler. He was forever getting out there and moving around the empire, and the result was that he was in touch with churches everywhere so he knew what churches all over the empire viewed as New Testament Scripture. So when he gives us a record, it is an extremely valuable record because of his travels. He contrasts what he called the divine Scriptures of the Old Testament and the New Testament. He treats them, here in the 3rd century, as being instinctive bodies of books. He found that 21 of our New Testament books were accepted everywhere among churches. Six of them some churches had questions about: Hebrews, James, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and, of course 2 Peter.

**Dionysius the Great**

Another man during this period of the 3rd century was Dionysius the Great. He lived from 190 to 265 A. D. He was an Alexandrian lawyer and a very prolific writer. He recognized all of the New Testament books except 2 Peter and Jude. One interesting thing that Dionysius gives us is that he tells us that the book of Hebrews was written by Paul, passing on again the tradition of the believers, the information that they had at the time. The problem that Hebrews had with getting into the canon was just that very fact. It doesn’t say who wrote it. So immediately the question of apostolicity came in. Was it written by an apostle? Does it merit that first requirement to get into the canon? Hebrews does not identify the writer. Dionysius passes on the word that it was understood among the early Christians that Paul was the writer of Hebrews. He may be correct or not.

**Cyprian**

Another man is Cyprian, 200 to 258 A. D. Cyprian was Bishop of Carthage of Africa, and he was the greatest bishop of the 3rd century. He was a writer and a martyr for the faith. He quotes the New Testament books extensively as Scripture. He does not quote from Hebrews, James, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and 2 Peter. He may not have seen these books or he may not have had occasion to quote them, but they are the same books over which there was some general question.

**The 4th Century**

Then you come down to the 4th century where the matter of the New Testament was finally fully crystalized. In this century, the various books circulating in the churches became a single collection as we know them today. There were certain reasons why the canon was finally crystalized, and I think we ought to go over those. One was the desire of the Christians for a collection of an authoritative record of the works and the messages of Jesus Christ as well as the inspired writings of the apostles. Christians just wanted a fully authoritative record from which to study. Therefore there was this motivation to identify what was New Testament Scripture, so when they ran Bible class, they would know what to use, what to concentrate on, and from whence to draw the doctrine that they were to teach.

Also, number two, there was the existence of false teachers who were championing false doctrines with several false Scriptures—books which were forgeries, written under the name of an apostle. Books which were spurious apocryphal books in New Testament times, and they were using these as Scripture. So, in order to meet the false teachers, the Christians had to decide what was the New Testament.

There were various sects which had grown up and they were changing the writings of the apostles. They were taking the authoritative books and they were changing them. One big heretic was this fellow named Marcion, and he didn’t care one whit for anything Jewish. He rejected all of the gospels except Luke, and he chopped off the first part of it. He got rid of the whole book of Acts because the first part of that is all about Peter. He just readapted these legitimate canonical books in order to fit the heresies that he was teaching. So the Christians said, “We’ve got to get the writings settled, and we have to find what is the true copy of gospel of Luke. What is a true copy of the book of Romans, so that when we deal with the heretics, we have the Scriptures to deal from?”

Number four: Many books appeared as forgeries under the names of the apostles.

Number five: Christians needed to know the full scope of apostolic teaching in order to unite in its defense. Christians wanted to be saying the same thing. They wanted to be championing the same doctrines. Therefore they had to know what the books were of Scripture to know what the doctrine that they should defend should be.

Number six: The spread of Christianity led to making translations as early as 150 A. D., so that raised the question as to what is Scripture. This was the problem for the Syriac Peshitta translation. Immediately they had to say, “What is Scripture?” The same was true for that old Latin version: “What is Scripture?”

Number seven: Statements of faith required knowing the limits of Scripture. Creeds were drawn up—statements as to what we as Christians believe. These statements had to be drawn from Scripture. You had to know what the Scripture was to draw it from.

Number eight was a very vital one because the Roman Emperor Diocletian turned loose the last of the great persecutions upon Christians. These persecutions necessitated the defending of what was true Scripture and what was not. In 303 A. D., Diocletian decided that the Roman Empire was falling apart, which it was. He decided that the trouble was that they had gotten away from the old state religion of emperor worship. So Diocletian decided that they were going to come back to the old religion and to the old worship status of the emperor as the God. Therefore, he declared that Christians were public enemies. As public enemies, he ordered their churches torn down. He ordered their copies of Scriptures burned. And he ordered the pastor-teachers hunted down, tortured, and killed by wild beasts in the amphitheaters. There is many a believer who has the same feeling toward pastor-teachers today that Diocletian had, but they are not able to get their hands on them in the way that the emperor could. Consequently, because of this persecution, the believers had to decide what they were going to die for in the way of writings and what they would not die for. So they identified what the New Testament books were which they had to preserve as the Word of God.

Finally, number nine, the crystalizing of the canon was precipitated by the fact that Constantine in 313 A. D. had become emperor of the Roman Empire, and he legalized Christianity. He made Christianity a legal religion. Up to then if you were practicing Christianity you were practicing an illegal religion, and in the Roman Empire, you could only practice the religions that were legalized. He legalized Christianity. A couple of emperors later, Christianity was not only legalized, but Christianity received its death blow at the hands of the Roman Empire because Christianity was name the state religion. When Christianity became the state religion, in poured the pagans with all the Babylonian cults and all the heritage of the Babylonian mystery worship, and this created what we know today as the Roman Catholic Church. Please remember that especially during these first three centuries, there was no such thing as the Roman Catholic Church. This developed after Constantine in 313 A. D. became a Christian emperor.

**Eusebius**

Now he order Eusebius to make 50 copies of the Scriptures in 331 A. D. in order to pass these around among the churches in the new capital that Constantine was setting up at Constantinople. When Eusebius had to start copying the New Testament, it necessitated here, in just about the middle of the 4th century, what constituted the New Testament Scriptures. Eusebius lived from 270 to 340 A. D. He was an historian and a bishop of Caesarea. He is called the father of church history. He was an historian. He was learned. He was a faithful collector of facts. He saw much of the suffering and the pain of the Roman persecutions. He reported various attitudes which had now developed in the 4th century toward the apostolic writings. Here they were:

The first attitude that Eusebius reports were a category of books called the “homologoumena” such as we had in the Old Testament. The “homologoumena” means “no debate,” books upon which everybody agreed. They were books which were everywhere accepted as New Testament Scripture. These were the four gospels, the book of Acts, 13 Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, and 1 John. 20 books fell into the “homologoumena” category. Then there were the “antilegomena.” The “antilegomena” were books against which some churches had some doubt, against which there was some question, with some people speaking against them. These included Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation; in other words, the other seven books.

In Hebrews, as we indicated, there was no name. That’s why it was antilegomena. James seemed to be in conflict with Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith. Also, there were several men named James, and the question was, which James? They wanted to know if this was James the apostle so that it had the authority it needed.

Then 2 Peter had a hard time because it was so different in style and in language from 1 Peter. Yet it clearly claims to be written by Peter, and if it was not written by Peter, it was obviously a forgery. But the reason that the style was so different was because this was Peter’s last letter. He was dying, and this was his final statement. Consequently, he was speaking in a way that is a little different, a little more distinctive. When a person is sitting down and writing the last thing he’s ever going to write, it tends to have a different flavor to it. 2 Peter finally was accepted as fully canonical.

2 and 3 John bothered people because they’re such personal letters. They’re like little notes that you write to friends. Furthermore they claim to have as an author an elder rather than an apostle. However, John calls himself an elder. Jude purportedly refers to and quotes from a forgery called the Book of Enoch. Also, there was a question of exactly who was the author here.

Finally, the book of the Revelation was at first received, then it was doubted for a while because of its authorship, and finally it was accepted. It wasn’t doubted until later. It was maybe the 4th century before it began to be doubted. The reason it was doubted was because by that time there had risen an anti-premillennial attitude among the church fathers. During the early centuries, as you read the writings of the church fathers, you cannot find one church father who is not a premillennial. The premillennial view of Scripture was the only view of Scripture they knew. Along with that very naturally would go a dispensational frame of reference. It is inherent with the premillennial view. But as there rose an anti-premillennial attitude, the book of the Revelation began to be questioned because obviously the book of the Revelation presents a view of history that is strictly premillennial.

**The New Testament Apocrypha**

Now the third category is the Apocrypha. These are New Testament apocryphal books. There are at least fifteen and maybe more. These fell into the category of apocryphal gospels. This is very natural. People had a desire to know more about the birth and the childhood of Jesus, about his mother Mary, and the period of the Lord’s ministry after His resurrection. So there arose legendary fictitious fanciful inventions, and some of them, for heretical reasons, stories which had been created, all of these were put together in gospels. If you were to read any of these, it would be a joke to you. You wouldn’t have any trouble sensing that these are non-canonical books. Some of these were in the form of Acts of the Apostles. This was a desire for more information about the apostles. You hear a lot about Peter and Paul in our book of acts, but you don’t hear much about the other apostles. So in order to create information about the other apostles, these books were written. Also, the heretics, in order to create justification for their point of view, would create stories about what the other apostles taught in order to convey their points of view.

Then there were false epistles and a false apocalypse; that is, like the book of the Revelation. These were mostly crude imitations of the New Testament epistles and of the Revelation.

Finally, there was one other group called the “pseudepigrapha,” and the “pseudepigrapha” are forgeries. They were merely a large number of books, never viewed as canonical, but writings in the form of gospels, epistles, and apocalypses to which the name of an apostle was attached.

**Athanasius**

Now in this period we have the testimony of Athanasius, 296 to 373 A. D. This was in the 4th century. He was Bishop of Alexandria. He was a theologian and a writer. In 367 A. D., he for the first time applied the word “canonical” to the 27 books. So 367 A. D. becomes rather a pivotal date because here you have a crystalized clear declaration of New Testament Scriptures as you and I know it today. It progressed historically on certain specific qualifications and the believers were in touch with the Lord all the way down the line as these books were being accepted. He spoke out against those who mixed what he called “non-scripture” with our 27 New Testament books. This was a climactic statement.

**Jerome**

Another man was Jerome, 340 to 420 A. D. He was the most learned and eloquent and interesting of this century. He translated the famous Latin Vulgate version, 382 to 384 A. D., that we have talked about. He recognized the same 27 New Testament books as we have. He explains how James and 2 Peter were finally accepted as inspired books.

**Augustine**

One of the great church fathers in this period also was Augustine, 354 to 430 A. D. He was Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He was an extensive writer and he bore a very great influence on the thinking of the church. He held to the 27 books of our New Testament canon.

**Church Councils**

Then we had a series of church councils. Now concerning church councils, you are acquainted with these in our day. The Roman Catholic Church has in recent years had another great ecumenical council. This is when all the spiritual leaders, the heads of the church, are brought together and they have a conference in order to talk out certain doctrinal problems or certain policy matters relative to the church. The church councils did not create the canon of New Testament Scripture. All the councils did was recognize what people had come to accept as Scripture under the guidance of the spirit of God. They had to settle what the New Testament was because they were going to debate certain doctrines concerning Christ. So in order to debate those doctrines, they had to know what the New Testament Scriptures were which would form the ground of authority.

So there was the Council of Laodicea in 363 A. D. It confirmed our New Testament books except Revelation. Then the Council of Damascus at Rome in 383 A. D. recognized our 27 books. The Council of Hippo in 393 A. D. declared our 27 books. The Third Council of Carthage in 397 A. D. declared our books only, our New Testament books as we have them today, as the only books to be read in the churches. The Council of Carthage in 419 A. D. repeated the decision of the Third Council of Carthage and said that our 27 books alone were Scripture.

Now let’s sum it up. Why were the New Testament books accepted as Scripture? Not for external reasons. You must understand that. It is not because a New Testament book was old that it was accepted. Books like 1 Clement were written at the time of the apostle John, and centuries later it was not accepted just because it was an old book. It was not because there was a formal list of New Testament books which Jesus and the apostles had confirmed. Now we had that help concerning the Old Testament because Jesus did confirm the Old Testament, and the apostles confirmed the Old Testament books by those that they quoted from. We have no list like that for the New Testament. So it was not because of that.

Nor was it because these books were venerated above other literature of New Testament times. There is some other very useful literature that the Christians appreciated which was written in New Testament times, but these were not brought into the canon. It is not because there’s a language difference—like the liberals used to say that the Jews brought books into the canon of the Old Testament because they were written in Hebrew, so they venerated the Hebrew language. Well everybody spoke Greek in the New Testament world. Everybody wrote in Greek, so it wasn’t because the New Testament was in a special language. Nor was it the decree of the church councils. These councils merely recognized what developed as the canon. As a matter of fact, the New Testament writers don’t even indicate any intention of trying to produce a supplement to the Old Testament.

There were certain internal reasons. Among these are the principle of continuity. The New Testament books are in perfect agreement with the Old Testament Scripture, prophecy, in type, in antitype, in historical sequence, and the progression of doctrine. There is no break between these books. In some of the other books written in New Testament times which were not Scripture, there are breaks. But with the 27 books of the New Testament, there is a consistency with the Old Testament. This is the result of the guidance of many writers who lived in different places who produced the New Testament books under the hand of the Holy Spirit. The books of the New Testament are in a harmonious order. If you were to take one of them out, you would ruin the picture. If you were to shuffle them around, you would ruin the picture. There was a progression that the Holy Spirit deliberately put together, indicating that every book had to be written in order to hit that particular spot.

You may look at the Bible as a whole. When we do, you get the sense that here is what guided the believers, the sense that God was in these books, and He was not in others. We find that invisible things are clearly and accurately described. There is no way that could be done unless God revealed that to the writers.

We find that the Bible is the greatest book for being reproduced in other languages in all the world, more than any other book. That indicates something special about this book.

We find that the Bible exercises an unprejudiced authority. It doesn’t favor man, and it reveals his faults. The Bible has been the most influential book in history. It has brought nations to stability. It has brought individuals to stability.

The Bible is the world’s most attacked book. Any time the Word of God is clearly and definitively proclaimed, you may be sure that Satan is going to be there to tear it up and to destroy the outreach in one way or another. It is a privileged group of believers who are in a situation where the Word of God is effectively being proclaimed. Unfortunately, most Christians sit around in church situations where the last thing on earth they’re doing as an organization is effectively proclaiming the Word of God which is the only reason they’re in existence.

**The Bible on Science**

The Bible is always accurate in its original manuscripts when it deals with matters of science. We’ve touched on some of these. The Bible tells us that the earth was a sphere (Isaiah 40:22, Proverbs 8:27) long before Columbus came along. We have the functioning of the laws of gravity on heavenly bodies indicated in Job 26:7. That’s why they hang out there in space that way. We have the indication that air has weight. Nobody (else) knew this before Galileo came along, but Job 28:25 knew this. We have the principles of the circulation of wind in patterns told us in Ecclesiastes 1:6. We have the principle of evaporation is revealed in Ecclesiastes 1:7. We have the principles of quarantine for communicable diseases in Leviticus 13:45-46, and so on. Any place the Bible touches we have these fantastic accuracies in every way.

So the basic factor to remember in canonicity for the apostolic writings was that these New Testament books had behind them the hand of an apostle. They were apostolic writings. That was the issue. Even Mark and Luke were written under an apostle’s authority. They held a special position as apostles in the New Testament church, so they were guided by the Holy Spirit because they had this gift, and therefore spoke without error.

**The Roman Catholic Church**

So the Holy Spirit has given us as believers agreement everywhere on these 27 books. Our experience confirms that they are Scripture. Please remember that it is false to say that the church produced the Scripture. Sometimes you will hear the Roman Catholic Church make this declaration. The Roman Catholic Church says, “Why can we speak above the Scriptures? Because we produced the Scriptures. Therefore, our authority supersedes the Scriptures.” That is false. It was the other way around. The Bible is entirely the product of God through the apostles, and out of these writings came the church.

Please remember that the church of the first three centuries, during which the New Testament canon was produced, is not the church that we know as the Roman Catholic Church today. No Roman Catholic today would feel at home in the church of the first three centuries, because in the church of the first three centuries: There was no **purgatory**. There was no doctrine of **confession of sin to the priest** for absolution. There was no such thing as **the mass** in those first three centuries. Both elements of the elements—both **the bread and the wine**—were consumed by the people, not as today where the people get the bread and the priest gets the wine. There was no **papal infallibility** claimed in these first three centuries. No bishop of Rome was trying to claim absolutes superior infallibility.

There was no **rosary** for you to count your beads. This had to wait until the Crusades when they went out and found these Mohammedans lying on the battle field that they had killed in the process of trying to retake Jerusalem, and they found this way of praying with beads that these Mohammedans had. They said, “Hey, that’s a good way to do that. We’ll take these beads and we’ll give them different names.” So the rosary came into effect to pray.

There was no **celibacy of the clergy**. Clergy were not required to be single in those first three centuries. There was no such thing as **indulgences** that you could by to cover your sins. There was no **treasury of the merit of the saints** from which you could draw, or the priest could dispense grace to you to cover your sin out of the extra goodness of the saints (the super arrogation is the official word, I believe). All of these saints that had been canonized, they were not only good enough to go to heaven, but they were more than good enough. They were good enough for there to be a depository, a treasury of grace. And for you sinners who can’t make it, the church has the authority to shell out to you the extra grace of these people in order for you to make it. Now that is communism—not Christianity. That is communism in grace, but not known in the first three centuries. It was a whole different ball game.

There was no **perpetual virginity of Mary** in the first three centuries. Everybody understood that Mary had other children. This came later, that she never had other children. Nor the doctrine of her **special adoration**. Nor the doctrine of her **immaculate conception**. Why was Christ without an old sin nature? Not because He didn’t have a human father, the Roman Catholic Church says, but because His mother was immaculate. She did not have a sin nature, therefore she could have a child without a sin nature. I don’t know what the explanation is as to why she didn’t have a sin nature. That was never known in the first three centuries. Nor **the bodily assumption**. Most of you living here today were alive when the church formally declared that from now on every catholic, as of this moment, after I get through reading this ex cathedra from my throne as the pope; after I get through reading this decree, from now on, every catholic must believe that Mary rose to heaven physically just like her Son—that she never died. Now yesterday you didn’t have to believe that, and that was alright. Now, if you don’t believe it; now, after I read this decree, you will come under the condemnation of the church. That was sometime in the 1950s that that was declared—a recent declaration.

So a Roman Catholic who would have visited a service in the catacombs in the first three centuries would not have felt at home, but you as Protestants would have. You would have had no problem down in those tombs in the worship service. It would have been just like plain old Berean Memorial Church all over again, but without the band because they couldn’t make a lot of noise and alert the troops. Otherwise, they would have had that too.

So this is the church which was testing these books. It was the church which as in touch with God. This was the church which was bleeding and dying under persecution for the faith. These were the people who knew the Lord and who loved him and who understood his Word when they heard it. They were in touch with the things of the spirit of God.

Well, this is the New Testament canon. It’s a matter of historical events. The New Testament books were all written by the year 100 under apostolic authority. They reduced the oral teaching to a permanent written form. These writings were reviewed and they were accepted—these 27 books—as the rule of faith of Christianity. By the middle of the second century, 20 of these books were well known. By the end of the 4th century, our 27 books were fully accepted as New Testament Scriptures. Some took longer and some took less time to get in. There was no human authority that made this decision. So may it be our prayer, as we realize some of the price that it took to get us these New Testament books, may it be our prayer to seek to be the fulfillment of the prayer of the Lord in John 17:17 when the Lord said, “Sanctify them through Thy truth. Thy Word is truth.” Jesus Christ prays that we might be set apart to the word of God (“sanctify them”). And how is this to be accomplished? Through the divine truth of Bible doctrine (“thy Word”). Jesus Christ is leaving us a very vital piece of information in this verse. The canonical Scriptures are the truth of God. That word is dependable. That word is information communicated to us by God. The canonical Old and New Testaments are the very words of the mouth of God. They are not just a record of His revelation, nor just a guide to His Word. The Word is free of all error because it is inspired by God. Only the Bible will provide you and me with the viewpoint we need for maximum blessing of the Lord upon us.

It is popular today to take the Bible lightly, even among Christians. The greatest need of society today is a return to the external authority of the Bible. So you and I as Christians are to be witnesses to this authority in a world which is hostile to what God has said. This is a world that is hostile to the supernatural. You can never be that kind of a witness until your heart is convinced and firmly established that in the New Testament canon you have the mind of Christ.

The unbeliever begins to wonder that maybe when he dies there is going to be a God to account there. That unbeliever has to have some authority more than your philosophies, more than your opinions, and more than your kind thoughts that you may create. He has to have an authoritative statement from the God who is out there that he begins to worry that he may have to face. Unless you and I have a firm conviction ourselves that we handle in the New Testament, these Scriptures, and the only Scriptures given to us by God for this age, we can’t speak to him with authority.

Isaiah 52:7 declares, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings; that publisheth peace and bringeth good tidings of good; that publisheth salvation that sayeth unto Zion, ‘Thy God reigneth.’” Behind you and me lies the long dark night of our sin. The gods which we have created in our own image, the vain philosophies that we have produced in order to suit are case, but ahead of us is Emmanuel’s land. Our God reigneth. And you will reign with Him, and you enter into His reign now, through this New Testament Canon of Scripture which He has delivered. In it you have the source of His viewpoint. Outside of it you have nothing but darkness. May we esteem and respect the New Testament canon of Scripture for the divine thing that it really is.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1971