



CONSISTENTLY IMPACTING OUR COMMUNITY

## **SCHOOL OF THE BIBLE**

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# **How did the 27 books of the New Testament get chosen?**

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The purpose of these notes are to assist in developing a proper understanding of the course presented. They are not a comprehensive evaluation of the material and are intended to supplement instruction given.

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First edition 2010

**How did the 27 books of the New Testament get chosen?**

The Gospel began as a message, not a book. It was preached before it was written. At the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples were scattered, traumatized and afraid. At the resurrection of Jesus, they were amazed and delighted, but still confused. When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, they were enlightened and empowered. Now they finally understood the meaning of the coming, death and resurrection of Jesus. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the love of God, and the joy of salvation they boldly proclaimed the good news: Jesus has died, Jesus has risen, and Jesus will come again. Repent and believe the good news. Be baptised for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and eternal life (Acts 2). At this stage there was no thought of writing any books. The apostles certainly did not sit down and work out a five-year plan, including the production of a New Testament. After all, Jesus was coming again soon, and their burning desire was to preach the good news to as many people as possible that they might be saved.

After a while persecution broke out in Jerusalem. The disciples were scattered, and wherever they went they spoke about the gospel. Gentiles began receiving Christ. The arch-enemy of the Christians, Saul of Tarsus, was dramatically converted and appointed by the Lord to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He spent the rest of his life travelling throughout the Roman Empire, preaching and teaching and forming churches. When problems arose in some of these churches, Paul wrote letters to them to try and give guidance and help. Little did he think that these letters would one day be enshrined in the New Testament. Things happened spontaneously. These letters proved effective so he wrote more letters, especially when he was in prison, and could not preach. His letters were cherished by the believers, bearing the authority of their author. They were copied and circulated around all the churches and became the beginning of a written standard of the Christian faith.

The Gospels first existed as oral traditions, remembered stories of the words and deeds of Jesus, passed on from disciple to disciple. After a while some began to make written records of these stories. Luke describes how this took place. "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." Which was the first Gospel to be written? Many think that Mark's Gospel was the first, which then became a source for Matthew and other gospel writers. Others think that Matthew wrote first, and then Mark wrote a shorter Gospel, not to repeat everything Matthew wrote, but to include some details not included in

his Gospel. Whatever the case, eventually four Gospels were written. Why four? Though much of the material is common, each one makes its own special contribution, and together they represent the fullness of the apostolic tradition concerning Jesus. In addition to the four Gospels and the letters of Paul, other apostolic documents were written: the books of Acts, letters of Peter, John, James and Jude; the book of Hebrews and Revelation.

Were all these documents immediately accepted by the churches as having special status and apostolic authority? Not actually. Different churches drew up lists of those books they received. From the beginning there was full agreement concerning the four Gospels and the letters of Paul and most of the 27 books. But there were some books in dispute, namely, Hebrews, 2 & 3 John, 2 Peter, and Revelation. To complicate matters further, some churches included in their list books like the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache and the letter of Barnabas (these books are now referred to as the Apostolic Fathers - the earliest Christian writings after the NT books. They include the letters of Clement and Ignatius, the Didache, the epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the letters of Polycarp and Diognetus). Through a process of discussion and dialogue, eventually complete consensus was reached round about the third century concerning the 27 books now included in the NT. This consensus has remained and there has never been any dispute about the canon of the NT.

We see here a double work of the Holy Spirit, firstly in inspiring the apostolic authors to record their witness to the gospel of Christ, and secondly in guiding the community of the faithful to recognise and receive those documents specially inspired by God. We could also mention a third work of the Holy Spirit – guiding the community of believers to understand those things revealed in Holy Scripture. In the second and third work of the Spirit above mentioned, a process is involved, which includes discussion, debate and dialogue towards consensus.

Two points remain to be made. Firstly, what about the gospel of Judas, the gospel of Truth, the gospel of Thomas and the other Gnostic gospels? These were 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century writings associated with Gnosticism and they were never considered for inclusion in the NT canon. Gnosticism was a separate movement, fiercely opposed by all the church fathers (compare the Book of Mormon, which no regular church has ever even vaguely considered as equal to the Bible). Secondly, what about the Apostolic Fathers that were excluded from the canon of the NT – has the church been deprived of something valuable? See for yourselves. These books are readily available. They were written by sincere Christians and

contain some edifying material. But they are in a different league altogether from the NT books. They simply do not belong in the NT as anyone reading them will quickly discover. (The epistle of Barnabas contains some quite absurd things about the meaning of forbidden foods in the OT; the Didache has a naïve remark about fasting; and the Shepherd is a long rambling tract concerned with the question of forgiveness for sins after baptism.)

In Ephesians chapter 2 Paul teaches that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The apostolic testimony about Jesus is the definitive and authoritative basis for our faith. Everything we know about Jesus is contained in this testimony, written by those who were eyewitnesses of his life and deeds. Jesus chose and appointed them to lay this foundation. It cannot be added to or changed. Our task as servants of God and Christ is to build the church on this foundation. Our preaching and teaching is only true insofar as it accords with the teaching of the apostles as laid down in the books of the New Testament. Our knowledge of Jesus, upon which our lives depend, is dependant on the trustworthiness of the NT apostolic writings.