

## "Contend Earnestly For the Faith" Part 15: *The Development of the New Testament Canon*

Tuesday Night Bible Study, August 1, 2006

"...contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." – Jude 3

### --INTRO / RECAP:

--In the previous studies we looked at how New Testament Scripture went from the mind of God to the original New Testament documents. In parts 15-16 we're going to explore how the books of the New Testament went from the original documents to the pages of the Bible we hold in our hands today.

--God gave special authority to the apostles and inspired their teachings through the Holy Spirit. The New Testament authors were either apostles (Matthew, John, Peter, Paul), assistants to the apostles who wrote under the direction of the apostles (Luke, Mark), or church leaders who worked along side the apostles (James, Jude).

--"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God..." (2 Timothy 3:16)

--the apostles were commissioned by God's direct command...

--the original apostles: **"He [Jesus Christ] had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen**, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which,' He said, '... you shall be baptized by the Holy Spirit not many days from now.' ... 8 'But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and **you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**" (Acts 1:2-9) ...emphasizes their dependence on the Holy Spirit

--the apostle Paul: "But the Lord said to him [Ananias who baptized Paul], 'Go, **for he [Paul] is a chosen vessel of Mine** to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.'" (Acts 9:15) / "Paul, **an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the commandment of God...**" (1 Timothy 1:1)

### --collection and circulation of the New Testament books among the first generation church:

--when a church received an apostolic writing, they would make a copy for their collection of New Testament Scripture (along side the Old Testament) that was read on a regular basis and then send the original on to other churches for them to make a copy; through this process, the body of New Testament Scripture at each church gradually expanded.

--public reading of Scripture was a long established tradition continued by the early church...

--example of public reading of Old Testament Scripture at the beginning of the apostle Paul's ministry before he had written any of his epistles (this passage also gives an insightful glimpse into the inner dynamics of the early church and how Paul's ministry was confirmed not only by the apostles but also by the church in general... Unlike many false teachers, Paul was not some random person who claimed divine inspiration)

--Acts 12:25-13:52: "And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their ministry, and they also took with them John whose surname was Mark [author of the gospel Mark]. 13:1 Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 **As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."** 3 **Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.** 4 So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant. ... 14 But when they departed from Perga, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. 15 And **after the reading of the Law and the Prophets**, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on." 16 Then Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: ... [Paul explains Old Testament background for the gospel] ... 23 From this man's seed [David's seed], according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a Savior – Jesus ... 26 "Men and brethren, sons of

the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this salvation has been sent. 27 For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even **the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath**, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. ... 32 And we declare to you glad tidings... [Paul explains more Old Testament background]... 42 So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, **the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath**. 43 Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. 44 **On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.** [Paul's preaching of God's Word is still heard in churches today... through the pages of Scripture] 45 But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. 46 Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. 47 For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'" 48 Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region. 50 But the Jews stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. 51 But they shook off the dust from their feet against them, and came to Iconium. 52 And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."

--examples of New Testament books being intended for an extended audience:

--Paul specifically states that his epistle to the Colossians should not only be read by them but also by the Laodicean church.

--Paul begins Colossians by addressing the church in Colosse: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 **To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse**: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you..." (Colossians 1:1-2)

--but then Paul ends the epistle by writing, "Now **when this epistle is read among you**, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea." (Colossians 4:16-17)

--James wrote his epistle to Jews in general: "James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (James 1:1)

--the apostle John's introduction to Revelation: "John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come..." (Revelation 1:4)

--Paul warned about counterfeit letters:

--2 Thessalonians 2:1-3: "Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, 2 not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or **letter supposed to have come from us**, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. 3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way..."

--Paul's handwriting was one way that people identified his epistles as being authentic. Sometimes Paul employed a scribe to write the body of the text, and then he would write the greeting in his own handwriting:

--2 Thessalonians 3:17: "I, Paul, write this greeting **in my own hand**, which is the **distinguishing mark in all my letters**. This is how I write."

--Colossians 4:18: "...I, Paul, write this greeting **in my own hand**. Remember my chains. Grace be with you."

--1 Corinthians 16:21: "I, Paul, write this greeting **in my own hand**..."

--another important hallmark of the authenticity of New Testament documents was the continuity between them...

--Peter's reference to the continuity among the growing collection of Paul's writings: "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the

wisdom that God gave him. 16 **He writes the same way in all his letters**, speaking in them of these matters." (2 Peter 3:15-16)

**--not only continuity between Paul's letters but also between his letters and the Old Testament**, evidenced by the numerous references to the Old Testament in Paul's writings (Paul was an expert in Old Testament scholarship). Hence, the Bereans "searched the scriptures daily [Old Testament] to find out whether these things [what Paul taught] were so..." (Acts 17:11)

--in part 16 we'll explore other the authentication of New Testament documents in further detail...

--because of the slow process of making copies of Scripture by hand, most people could only know Scripture through public reading. Only a select few people had their own copies

--1 Timothy 4:12: "Till I come, **give attention to reading**, to exhortation, to doctrine."

--1 Thessalonians 5:27-28: "I charge you by the Lord **that this epistle be read** to all the holy brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen."

**The reality of people not having personal copies of the Bible may seem like a thing of the past, but even today in third world countries many people don't have a Bible. Through Gospel For Asia and Open Doors with Brother Andrew you can send Bibles. Excerpt from letter by Brother Andrew, founder of Open Doors:**

...And Bibles are in such short supply, he says, that "only those who have been Christians for at least two years and are deeply committed to Christ are permitted to receive one."

...[A coworker] saw a copy of the Children's Bible for the first time recently and wrote, "We need 10,000 of these Bible storybooks. Every time my coworkers ask me for children's materials, I respond, 'We must pray.'"

"We have many young new converts here... **They thirst for the Word of God so much**. But we cannot provide a Bible to each of them, even though they urge us. **We can only tell them to pray** to God and ask Him to provide a Bible to them one day."

**All they can do is pray. But that is all they need to do. They know -- and we know -- that the Father hears and answers every prayer.**

**--recap of the mountain of New Testament manuscript evidence we have today that resulted from the books of the New Testament being circulated among the early church:**

--the Bible is by far the most accurately preserved book of all ancient books; second place to the Bible is Homer's Illiad (the Bible of the ancient Greeks)

<b>the Bible</b>	<b>Homer's Illiad</b>
<b>5,664</b> ancient Greek manuscripts (24,000 ancient manuscripts including other languages)	<b>650</b> ancient manuscripts
<b>50-250 year gap</b> between composition and oldest manuscripts in existence today	<b>1000 year gap</b> between composition and oldest manuscripts in existence today
20,000 lines in the New Testament with 40 in question	15,000 lines with 764 in question
<b>99.8% pure</b> (0.2% variance among the 5,664 Greek manuscripts)	<b>95% pure</b>

--the 0.2% variance among the New Testament manuscripts relate to trivial issues; no doctrinal issues are affected

--other ancient books that are considered valid by scholars fall even further in the distance behind the New Testament. Compared to the 5,664 ancient Greek manuscripts of the Bible...

- Titus Livy's *History of Rome*: 20 surviving manuscripts
- Caesar's *Gallic Wars*: 10 manuscripts
- Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*: 8 manuscripts
- Tacitus' *Works*: 2 manuscripts

**--by the end of the first century all 27 New Testament books had been written and circulated. Over the next 300 years the church went through the process of developing a formal list – the "canon" – of the 27 books of the New Testament.**

--*The history of the New Testament canon differs from that of the Old in several respects. In the first place, since Christianity was an international religion from the beginning, there was no tightly knit prophetic community which received all inspired books and collected them in one place [as was the case with the Old Testament] Local and somewhat complete collections were made from the very beginning, but there is no evidence of a central and official clearinghouse for inspired writings. Hence, the process by which all of the apostolic writings became universally accepted took several centuries.* (From God To Us, pg. 101)

--*The process of canonization was at work from the very beginning. The first churches were exhorted to select only the authentic apostolic writings. When a book was verified as authentic either by signature or apostolic envoy, it was officially read to the church and then circulated among other churches. Collections of these apostolic writings began to take form in apostolic times. By the end of the first century all twenty-seven New Testament books were written and received by the churches. The canon was complete and all the books were recognized by believers somewhere. Because of the multiplicity of false writings and the lack of immediate access to the conditions related to the initial acceptance of a book, the debate about the canon continued for several centuries, until the church universal finally recognized the canonicity of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.* (From God To Us, pg. 107)

--c. 150 AD: by this time all 27 books of the New Testament (except 3 John) were referenced in the writings of the early church fathers .

--*Not only did the early Fathers cite all twenty-seven books of the New Testament, they also quoted virtually all of the verses in all of these twenty-seven books. **Five Fathers alone from Irenaeus to Eusebius possess almost 36,000 quotations from the New Testament.** Sir David Dalrymple claimed to have found among the quotations of the second and third centuries "the entire New Testament, except eleven verses." **We know of no other book from the ancient world which exists en toto by way of thousands of individual and selected quotations of it.** It is an amazing fact that the New Testament could be reconstructed simply from quotations made within two hundred years of its composition.* (From God To Us, pg. 157)

--c. 200 AD: the *Old Latin* translation of the ancient Western world

--contained all books of the Bible except Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, which were likely written to churches in the East and therefore took longer to be recognized by the West (From God To Us, pg 110)

--c. 400 AD: the *Old Syriac* translation of the ancient Eastern world

--contained all books of the Bible except 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation, (opposite of books excluded from the Old Latin translation), which were written to churches in the West and therefore took longer to be recognized by the East

--*the omitted books were originally destined for the Western world, and the Syriac church was in the East. The distance and lack of verifying communications slowed down the final acceptance of these books in the Eastern Bible, which had come out before that evidence was available to them* (From God To Us, pg. 108)

--several church councils of the early church listed all 27 books of the New Testament in the official canon of Scripture...

- 393 AD: council of Hippo
- 397 AD council of Carthage 1
- 419 AD: council of Carthage 2

**--CONTINUED IN PART 16...**