

# HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

## SESSION 4: How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen

*“Long before biblical books were even discussed in councils, all the books of the New Testament had been accepted as Scripture in the churches. And Christians didn’t decide it; they simply recognized it to be so.”*

- Kenneth Berding, New Testament professor, Talbot School of Theology

*“From the first century AD forward, the words of Christ-commissioned eyewitnesses were received as the words of Christ Himself, and their writings were recognized as authoritative almost from the time they were written.”*

- Michael Kruger, President of Reformed Theological Seminary

The reliability of the New Testament documents hinges on their \_\_\_\_\_, genuine character, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ claims.

### Historicity and Accuracy:

The Synoptic Gospels were written within \_\_\_\_ generation of Jesus’ death while \_\_\_\_\_ of His ministry were still alive, and by those who were either close companions of Jesus or close associates of those companions.

*<sup>1</sup>Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup>just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup>it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. - Luke 1:1-4*

In addition, at least \_\_\_\_\_ extra-biblical references in non-Christian sources in the earliest centuries of the Christian era confirm the main contours of the Synoptics.

The Gospel of \_\_\_\_\_ was most likely written a generation later (in the 90s rather than the 60s), by one of the closest followers of Jesus, in his own idiom, influenced by a lifetime of preaching about Jesus, selecting information that had not been previously highlighted in writing. Geographical and topographical references are also more abundant in John, and they have been consistently corroborated by archeological finds (e.g., the pools of Bethesda and Siloam, Jacob’s well, Solomon’s portico, Gabbatha, Bethany, etc.).

\_\_\_\_\_ - The number of characters and places in this selective account of key events in the first generation of church history that have been confirmed is staggering. From non-Christian works alone, we know of Annas, Claudius, Gamaliel, Caiaphas, James, Gallio, Agrippa I and II, Sergius Paulus, Felix, Drusilla, Festus, Bernice, and others. Every city and location which has been excavated has been shown to be as Acts describes them, complete with specific synagogues, theaters, stoa, ports, roads, rivers, and more. Particularly significant is how Luke gets right the names of the rulers in the various locations, especially since in some instances they varied quite a bit in a given region or from one time period to the next. These include the Sanhedrin, the Italian Regiment, tetrarchs, proconsuls, magistrates, politarchs, the Areopagus, city clerk and the “chief man” (on the island of Malta).

### Transmission:

The vast majority of textual variants involved variations in the spelling of words; the use or non-use of an article, conjunction or particle; or slight variations in syntax. Most also came from the most recent centuries during the period of copying texts by hand.

Very few affect issues of \_\_\_\_\_.

The only two that involve more than 1-2 verses are Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11.

### Supernatural Claims:

What sets the New Testament miracles off from accounts in many other kinds of literature is their consistent link to the arrival or inauguration of God's reign in the person of Jesus and the movement he began (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20).

Claims about similarities with other ancient miracle stories break down on careful inspection; the closest parallels are all *post-Christian*, too late to have influenced the New Testament writers.

The most significant miracle in the new Testament (and the sole one on which our faith stands or falls) is the \_\_\_\_\_.

- 1) No one disputed that Jesus \_\_\_\_\_ on a cross.

He was seen to breathe his last by eye-witnesses, and was certified dead by Roman soldiers whose very business was killing. They decided not to break Jesus' legs (customary practice to hasten death in crucifixion), because they were convinced he was dead already; and this was confirmed by the observation of 'blood and water' (separated cells and serum) coming from his pierced side. This only occurs as a post-mortem event.

- 2) The body was \_\_\_\_\_. If the Jews had removed it (Mary's immediate assumption) then they would simply have reproduced it at the first rumor of resurrection. If the disciples had removed it, they would not have subsequently been prepared to die for what they knew had not happened. In any case, the tomb was heavily guarded, and they had all run for their lives when Jesus was arrested.

Pilgrims never flocked to Jesus' tomb. It was empty.

- 3) The post-resurrection \_\_\_\_\_ were impressive. Despite Jesus' repeated predictions that he would rise from the dead, all his followers first thought of other explanations for the missing corpse. What convinced them? Mary, the twelve disciples, the followers on the Emmaus road, Paul and 500 others became convinced when they saw him.
- 4) Christianity spread \_\_\_\_\_ after Jesus' death. Most of the twelve disciples later died for their belief that Jesus was God. Although dying for a belief does not make it true, the point is this: they came to believe in Christ's divinity after being convinced that he really had risen from the dead. It was this conviction that transformed them from fearful cowards into the bold apostles who literally turned the world upside down. The survival and growth of the early church resulted from the unshakeable belief that Jesus was alive.
- 5) The \_\_\_\_\_ of generations of Christians ... Christianity is not just a creed to be followed nor an ideology to be embraced; it is a dynamic relationship with a real living God – through Jesus Christ.

## Listening Guide:

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

### - 2 Peter 3:15-16 (ESV)

1. Who created the canon of the New Testament?

The canon wasn't created by any \_\_\_\_\_.

Early Christians recognized a canon that God had \_\_\_\_\_.

2. First-century Christians recognized the writings of Christ-commissioned \_\_\_\_\_ and their close associates as authoritative.

\_\_\_\_\_ : Galatians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 14:37–38

\_\_\_\_\_ : 2 Peter 3:15–16

\_\_\_\_\_ : Luke 1:1–2; John 21:24

The Muratorian Fragment: "The Shepherd" was rejected as authoritative because ...

3. Did all Christians recognize the same books?

\_\_\_\_\_ books of the New Testament were always recognized; \_\_\_\_\_ books were questioned.

" \_\_\_\_\_ " was rejected because it was not written by Peter.

4. Some New Testament books were questioned, but later it became clear that they could be traced to Christ-commissioned \_\_\_\_\_ and their close associates.

\_\_\_\_\_ (See Hebrews 13:23)

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ were half-brothers of Jesus who saw the resurrected Christ.

1 and 2 \_\_\_\_\_, 2 and 3 \_\_\_\_\_ were written by eyewitnesses of Jesus.

## Key Terms

**Apostle** — From Greek *apostolos*, “sent out,” “commissioned”; a witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:22) and recipient of his teachings (Ephesians 3:5), commissioned to safeguard the gospel and to apply the teachings of Jesus in the churches. Occasionally applied more broadly to individuals sent on a mission (Acts 14:4, 14).

**Athanasius** (c. 296–373) — A bishop in Alexandria who championed the doctrine of the Trinity against the heretic Arius. He wrote an Easter letter in the year AD 367 which listed the same 27 books that appear in the New Testament today.

**Irenaeus** (c. 130–c. 200) — As a pastor seeking to care for his people, Irenaeus came into sharp dispute with certain Gnostics who denied Christ’s humanity. Around AD 180, Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* in which he mentioned all four Gospels in order along with their origins.

**Lost Gospels** — The term “lost Gospels” usually refers to ancient writings that were excluded from the New Testament, even though they included supposed recollections of events and teachings from the life of Jesus. Complete manuscripts of a few of these lost Gospels have survived. Others survive only in tiny fragments of papyrus or in brief quotations found in the writings of early Christian scholars. Several lost Gospels were discovered anew in the past 100 years. Copies of some texts—such as Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Truth, and Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians—were unearthed in 1945 in Egypt, near a village known as Nag Hammadi. If a Gospel is defined as an ancient retelling of the events or teachings from Jesus’ life, there are fewer than 30 known Gospels. Unlike the New Testament Gospels, many lost Gospels record only isolated teachings or fragmentary incidents from the life of Jesus.

**Muratorian Fragment** — First known listing of Christian writings that were received as authoritative and be publicly read in the churches; so called because it’s recorded on a fragment discovered by a man named Ludovico Muratori around 1740. No one knows who recorded this list; the list seems to have been written in the vicinity of Rome in the second half of the second century and may have originated in a gathering of church leaders. The list includes all the books that appear in the New Testament today except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John.

Next week: **How the New Testament was Copied**