

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

Today's teaching is: THE ORIGIN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT – especially about the reconstruction of THE ORIGINAL GREEK TEXT of the New Testament and why only these 27 New Testament books were included in THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON.

POINT 1. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE GREEK TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

There are greater resources for reconstructing the original Greek text of the New Testament than for any other document in any language of the classic age! Three types of sources are presently available: Christians possess many Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, many early translations from the Greek text and many writings of the church fathers, who quote the New Testament.

First. The many Greek manuscripts.

One. The oldest fragments of the New Testament are a fragment of the Gospel of Mark 6:52-53 dated before A.D. 50 and fragments of the Gospel of John 18:31-34,37-38 dated A.D. 130. This proves that the Gospel of Mark was probably the first Gospel and that the Gospel of John was written before A.D. 100. The Chester Beatty Papyri contain a large part of the New Testament and is dated A.D. 200-250.

Two. The oldest volumes of the New Testament are written in large capital (printed/block) letters (“uncials”) between the fourth and eighth centuries A.D. Three volumes are especially important. The Codex Vaticanus contains almost the whole New Testament and is dated A.D. 325-350. The Codex Sinaiticus contains almost the whole New Testament and half of the Old Testament and is dated A.D. 350. The Codex Alexandrinus contains almost the whole Bible and is dated A.D. 400. They were made for public reading in the churches and were copied very carefully.

Three. The other volumes of the New Testament are written in small cursive letters between the tenth and fifteenth centuries A.D. Today we possess about 5000 Greek manuscripts of the Greek New Testament!

Second. The early translations from the Greek text.

Because missionaries spread the gospel to many countries, both towards the West and the East, the Greek New Testament was translated into Latin, the main language in the western part of the Roman Empire and Syriac, the main language in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. They were translated between A.D. 150-200, and were thus based on Greek manuscripts that were older than any that now survive. Translations help to ascertain the contents and exact meaning of the underlying Greek text.

One. The earliest translations of the Greek New Testament.

Translations of the Greek New Testament have been made between the second and fourth centuries A.D. into the following languages: Latin, Syriac, three Egyptian languages, Gothic, Armenian, Ethiopian, Georgian and Arabic. Today we possess about 1000 documents of these other earlier translations of the New Testament!

Two. The later Latin translations of the Greek New Testament.

In A.D. 384 the church father Jerome translated a standard Latin text based on the oldest existing Greek text and this was called the Vulgate or Common Version. This text was revised by Alcuin in the eighth century and again by the university of Paris in the thirteenth century before it was declared to be the standard text of the Roman Catholic Church in A.D. 1546. In the thirteenth century, Stephen Langton divided the text into chapters. Today we possess about 8000 manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate.

Third. The writings of the church fathers.

The church fathers were the leaders and teachers of Christianity during the first six centuries. They used the language of the Greek New Testament freely in their sermons and writings. Together they quoted all the verses except 11 of the whole New Testament! This is amazing!

Fourth. The trustworthiness of the Greek New Testament.

One. The number of manuscripts.

The most ancient historical books in the West we possess are from Herodotus and Thucydides and are from the 5th century B.C. While we only possess 8 manuscripts of each of these, we have 5000 manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, 1000 manuscripts of the earlier translations of the New Testament and 8000 manuscripts of the Latin New Testament! Thus the text of the New Testament has been preserved better than any other document of the ancient world!

Two. The time interval between copies and their originals.

The oldest historical books in the West, Herodotus and Thucydides, are from the 5th century B.C., but the oldest copies we have of them are from A.D. 900. While the time interval between the writing of these books and the date of their earliest extant copies is 1300 years, the time interval between the New Testament originals and their oldest extant copies is only 250 years! While classical scholars of history do not doubt the authenticity of the text of Herodotus and Thucydides, the reliability of the New Testament text is many times greater!

Three. The accuracy of the transcription or copying of the text.

The greatest Epic in the West is the Iliad and we possess 643 copies of it. Next to the New Testament, there are more extant copies of the Iliad than any other book of ancient times. Both books are considered sacred and both underwent some changes in their text through copying by hand. But, while 764 lines of the 15 600 lines of the Iliad are questioned, only 40 lines of the 20 000 lines of the New Testament are questioned, that is 250 times less! However, not one of these 40 lines or 400 words which are questioned in the New Testament Greek text affects either the doctrine or life of Christianity, because it is supported by other parts of the New Testament that stand above any doubt! We must therefore conclude that from the standpoint of literary evidence, the reliability of the New Testament Greek text is stronger than that of any other ancient written document in the whole world! Scholars are satisfied that we possess substantially the true text of the Greek New Testament.

POINT 2. THE CANON OR LIST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

First. The books which truly belong to the New Testament.

The books which are regarded as truly belonging to the New Testament are called 'canonical'. The word 'canon' means 'a straight reed' or 'ruler' used as a measuring stick. Applied to literature, the word 'canon' means *the list of books that conform to the standard of divine inspiration and authority*. The books of the New Testament say very clearly that they were inspired by God. Jesus says that in John 14:26 and 15:26-27 and the apostles Paul and Peter say that in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21. In 2 Timothy 3:16 is written, "All Scripture is God-breathed" or inspired. Thus, whatever was given by inspiration of God was Scripture, and whatever did not come by inspiration of God was not Scripture. Scripture is the written record of the inspired and authoritative words of God. The Apostolic Church, that is, the early Christian Church, considered 27 books of the New Testament Scripture as 'canonical', that is, as *divinely inspired and authoritative for what we should believe and how we should live*. The books which are not regarded as belonging to the New Testament are called 'apocryphal'. The word 'apocryphal' means 'hidden' and implies that their origin, message and inspiration are invented or of doubtful authenticity.

Second. Inspiration is demonstrated by three facts.

One. Inspiration is demonstrated by the contents of a book.

All the New Testament books have as their central subject the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Four Gospels record his life, his works and his words. The book of Acts record the effects of Jesus Christ in the history of the world. The Letters record the theological and practical teachings based on complete dependency on Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. The book of Revelation records the relationship of Jesus Christ to the present and future of this world. However, the apocryphal Gospels and the apocryphal Acts are more concerned with miracle-making than with teaching, and the apocryphal letters are pieces taken from the canonical letters. In precision of narrative, in depth of teaching, and in concentration on the person of Jesus Christ, there is a discernible difference between the canonical and apocryphal books.

Two. Inspiration is demonstrated by the effect of a book.

All literature may record human thought. But while some literature may influence human thought profoundly, the New Testament books transform human thought, values, behaviour and direction of life completely. The ethical and spiritual effect of the New Testament books are so great, that wherever its message is proclaimed and received, the Church expanded and brought with it a moral and spiritual cleansing of society! An unbridgeable chasm exists between the moral and spiritual standards of paganism and that of the New Testament books!

Three. Inspiration is demonstrated by the agreement of the internal testimony of a book with the external testimony of those who use it.

The test of the divine message and the moral power of these books cannot be applied successfully by a single individual in a limited sphere. Testimonies with respect to the inspiration of the Bible books should be made by many different people, living in different places over a great period of time. When the internal testimony of the books themselves and the external testimony of many different people who use them over a great period of time agree that they are works of God, then the criteria of canonicity are made more sure. This is explained in the following two points.

Third. The internal testimony of the New Testament that it is inspired by God.

From the beginning, the message concerning Christ was passed on from one person to another as *the word of God*. Galatians 1:11-12 says that “the gospel is not something that man made up”, but it has been “received by revelation from Jesus Christ”. 1 Corinthians 15:1-3 says that the gospel the apostle Paul received, he preached and passed on to others. 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says that the message was received by the hearers “as the word of God” and according to 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17, it produced a lasting effect on those who believed it.

The apostles regarded their writings as the inspired and authoritative word of God and warned people against disobedience. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 4:2 the apostle says, “You know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus”. In 2 Thessalonians 3:14 he says, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him and do not associate with him”. In 1 Corinthians 14:37-38 he says, “If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored.”

The collection of the Letters of Paul became canonical very early, because 2 Peter 3:15-16 alluded to it as a body of literature that should be received as “the other Scriptures”. The fact that even the apostle Peter wrestled with their contents and that ignorant and unstable people distorted them proves that they were authoritative. If they were not authoritative, nobody would have paid attention to them!

Fourth. The external testimony of the early church fathers, the formal canons and the church councils.

One. The external witness of the church fathers.

The earliest church fathers between A.D. 95 and A.D. 150, all quoted from the New Testament books. They were disciples of the apostles themselves or students of these disciples of the apostles. Justin Martyr lived from A.D. 100-165 and he referred to the Four Gospels, Acts, 8 Letters of Paul, 1 Peter and Revelation by name. He stated that the Gospels were read every Sunday in the church service along with the Old Testament. Irenaeus lived about A.D. 170 and was a student of Polycarp, who was a student of the apostle John. He referred to all the books of the New Testament except Philemon and 3 John.

Two. The external witness of the formal canons.

The Muratorian Canon is an unofficial list of New Testament books and is dated A.D. 170. It includes all the books of the New Testament except the General Letters of Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter. The Festal Letter of Athanasius in A.D. 367 distinguishes sharply between on the one hand “the God-inspired Scripture ... handed down to our fathers by those who were eye-witnesses and servants of the word from the beginning” and on the other hand “the secret writings of heretics”. He stated that only the 27 books of our New Testament is “God-inspired Scripture” and says that “these are springs of salvation. Let no one add to them or take away from them.”

Three. The external witness of the church councils.

These church councils were meetings of representatives of all the Christian churches. At the Council of Laodicea in A.D. 363, the subject of the canonical books was discussed for the first time. This council decided that only the canonical books of the New Testament should be read in the church services. The Council of Carthage in A.D. 397 made the same decision and added a clear list of the 27 books in our New Testament as being canonical. The Council of Hippo in A.D. 419 repeated the same decision and the same canonical list.

Fifth. The books which do not belong to the New Testament.

Throughout the centuries people have written so-called Gospels, Acts and Letters claiming that these were originals. However, they are clearly apocryphal, that is, of doubtful authenticity. Like the Old Testament apocryphal books, these New Testament apocryphal books have never been accepted as a part of the Christian canon or list of books that are regarded as inspired and authoritative for doctrine and life.

Sixth. The only true test if a book belongs to the New Testament or not.

In 2 Peter 1:20-21 we read, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In 2 Timothy 3:16 we read, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” The Bible clearly says that it is God the Holy Spirit who inspired the books in the Bible. Therefore it is clear that only the inspiration of the Holy Spirit makes a book a part of the *canon* or *the list of books that are divinely inspired and authoritative for doctrine and life*.

A man or a human council can never decide if a particular book is divinely inspired and authoritative for doctrine and life or not. The only thing a human council can do is *to recognise the quality already inherent by God’s act in the books so inspired!* When a child recognises his own parent from a multitude of other adults, he does not impart any new “quality of parenthood” to his parent by such an act. He simply recognises a relationship that already exists. The same is true of the *canon* or *the list of authoritative Bible books* that were drawn up by the early Christian councils. The Christian councils did not impart divine inspiration and authority to a single page of the Bible. They simply recognised and acknowledged the divine inspiration and authority of these religious documents, which were inherently divinely inspired and authoritative from the time they were written. In the same way, the early Christian councils rejected other books for which divine inspiration and authority had been falsely claimed!

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. During the next week, read through Matthew chapters 22-28.

Second. See the workbooks “Go and build Christ’s Church” and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to “Discipleship training on the air”.