

# Life Notes

## THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH PART 2 Key Moments and Personalities

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### #27. The Formation of the Bible - Part One (190-397 AD)

With time, the Roman government began to understand that it was impossible to stamp out Christianity by the extermination of Believers. Near the end of the persecutions, they tried another approach - the confiscation and destruction of the Scriptures. What they believed was earth shaking:

- The Bible was the distillation of God's Words into written form.
- The Scriptures didn't tell them everything about God, nor was it a repository of every truth. However, Christians believed that everything in it was true - and that the Bible was supernatural both in its presentation and preservation.
- The Bible was sufficient for every need in the Christian experience.
- In the pages of the Bible, Christians found inspiration for life (including martyrdom) and a safeguard against heresy and heretics.

With this in mind, we need to invest a couple of chapters understanding how the Bible was formed, and how it came to the community of Believers.

The word "Bible" means book or collection of books. Jerome (347-420), who translated the Scriptures into Latin, called the books of the Bible "The Divine Library." Our Bible is a collection of writings that span about 1600 years and may have as many as 40 authors, but by the time of Jerome, it was referred to as "The Book" instead of "The Books," which was the earlier descriptive title. This follows the Jewish concept, which viewed the Old Testament as both "Scripture and Scriptures." Christians view the Jewish Bible as the "Old Testament" (or First Covenant), and the New

Testament as the Fulfillment (completion) of the Old. The Testaments are not viewed as two Bibles, but as one.

The word "canon" is used to designate our view of the 66 books of the Bible. Canon means "measuring rod," or in our vernacular, "ruler or yardstick." Books in the Canon of Scripture are considered "inspired by God," and are therefore authoritative. We believe the inspiration of Scripture embraces the following ideas:

- The Bible is given to us from God. Human instrumentation is used, but God's Word is the element that makes the Bible divine.
- The Bible is verbally inspired. This means that the very words were selected by divine providence, not just concepts or ideas. This explains why such meticulous care was employed when the Scriptures were copied. Words mattered, not just ideas.
- The Bible has been preserved from error and contradiction in the original writings. While we understand that poor or even inaccurate translations exist, we hold to the belief that in their original languages and in the original manuscripts, the Scriptures are free of error. As we translate from the Hebrew and Greek into other languages, we do our best to be certain that our translations are as true to the original texts as possible.
- The Bible is accepted by orthodox Christians as fully sufficient, fully reliable, and as absolutely authoritative for life and faith.

These four pillars are foundational to Christianity, and reflect Jesus' own view of Scripture as well as that of the Apostles and early Church. From the beginning, Christian Believers embraced the Old Testament as their own. In our present structure, the Old Testament contains 39 books.

Some Christian writings (27 books and letters) gradually became known as the New Testament. These were not the only Christian writings, but there was something special about these books that made them recognized and valued as a continuation of God's unique revelation known as Scripture.

- Though the first identifying mark seems a bit abstract, those documents that became accepted as Scripture had what Church Historian Bruce Shelley calls “a self-evidencing quality” about them (*Church History in Plain Language; 4th Edition*; Thomas Nelson Publishers; page 68). In other words, there seemed to be a spiritually transforming power that flowed from these letters. There was a track record of supernatural benefit. It was clear that The Holy Spirit was at work through these writings.
- Secondly, some portions of the New Testament were added to the Canon of Scripture because they were used in worship. The reading of these documents was part of the worship experience in the churches, much as the reading of the Old Testament was part of worship in the Synagogue (Colossians 4:16). Justin Martyr (100-165) wrote concerning this practice in the early church services: “On the day called the “Day of the Sun” all who live in the cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts us to imitate these good things. Then we rise together and pray.” We see then that the Gospels were known as the “Memoirs of the Apostles.” But not every letter or book that was read was considered inspired. Clement’s Letter to the Corinthians, written in 96 AD, was read to the Corinthian congregation for nearly a century, but was never accepted as inspired Scripture. The point is that this reading was a characteristic early step toward acceptance as God’s Word.
- Finally, the Canon of the New Testament had a strong tie to an Apostle. Was it written by an Apostle or an Apostle’s protégé? Did it have apostolic endorsement? In my opinion, there have been Apostles throughout the history of the Church. I believe there are Apostles today. But I call these “second-tier Apostles.” They do not have the same anointing of purpose or the authority of the first group of Foundational Apostles. I realize that Paul’s place is difficult to define within this view. He was clearly the recipient of

a special anointing and was recognized as an Apostle, but I still place him as a member of the second tier, not the first. The debate will continue among theologians, but Paul was clearly associated with and approved by at least some of the original Twelve, and that may be qualification enough to embrace his writings as truly apostolic. After 2,000 years of church history, it is difficult for modern Christians to understand the influence of the Foundational Apostles. We are so far removed from them historically that unless they live among us through their writings, their true impact is lost to us. Referring again to Clement of Rome (35-88 AD), who was almost certainly instructed by both Peter and Paul, we have this statement in 1 Clement 42: “The Gospel writers were made evangelists by the Lord Christ. Thus, we know that Christ is from God, and the apostles were from Christ, and the church is built on them as a foundation.”

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