

# Lost Scriptures – September 20, 2015

by David Green

I've mentioned this before, but many years ago I was the keynote speaker at a summer Christian church camp for high school kids. One of the daily activities was a time every afternoon where these hundred or so teenagers could ask me anything at all. And I would answer as honestly as I could.

This was back in the day when my denomination was really struggling with the issue of whether or not to acknowledge the fact that gay people actually existed. And more specifically, what to do when a member of a church had the guts to let it be known they were gay. Not to mention what in the world to do if a gay person wanted to become a minister.

Since that was being talked about in some churches as if it was a huge crisis, the teenagers at that church camp wanted to know what I thought about it. And you have to picture the scene: a big room with all these high-schoolers sitting around on the floor looking up at me for answers, while standing around on the periphery were a bunch of adults. They were ministers and members of churches who were serving as camp counselors. Some of them – I knew – were a lot more conservative than me. Which wasn't difficult.

In a nutshell, I told the kids that God could not care less if someone is gay or not, and I couldn't see any reason why a gay person couldn't be accepted in a church, or even ordained as a minister if they met all the requirements. A person's sexual orientation was the way they were made, and since everything God made was good, gay people were good. And besides, there have always been gay Christians and gay clergy. They just haven't always been able to say so openly.

For the most part, the kids – who would now be in their 30s – were pretty receptive to my opinion. It was the first time some of them had ever heard a minister say anything remotely positive about gay people.

But what I said did not sit well with some of the adults. I was cornered by a few, who accused me of corrupting those kids, and they quoted chapter and verse from the Bible to support their belief that homosexuality was a sin. When I told them I had a different interpretation of things and thought the Bible could be wrong about a lot of stuff, a couple of them pulled out a passage of scripture I was very familiar with. You may have heard it yourself.

It's from Second Timothy, Chapter Three: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

That passage is very often trotted out as proof that the Bible is complete, without error, and should not be questioned. It's "God-breathed," and since God doesn't make mistakes, the Bible has no mistakes. So, if it says anywhere in the Bible that homosexuality is wrong, then it was God saying that. Humans did not write the Bible. God did. Case closed.

The problem with that reasoning is this: first of all, it's circular. Let's say you take a simple cocktail napkin, and write on it: "Everything on this napkin is true because it says so right on this napkin."

The second problem is, when the Apostle Paul wrote that letter to a minister named Timothy, sometime in the first half of the first century, he was not referring to the Bible as we now know it. Why not? Because the Bible as we now know it did not yet exist. There was no New Testament. The four gospels had not yet been written. The Book of Revelation had not been dreamed up. Even Paul himself had not written most of his letters, which went on to make up the bulk of the New Testament.

So, we can't be absolutely sure what Paul was referring to when he wrote the words, "all scripture." He certainly wasn't referring to the New Testament, since – like I said – it had not been composed or put together yet in its final form. He probably meant what we now call the Old Testament – or the Hebrew scriptures – but even that was not in any kind of final form when Paul wrote this letter to Timothy.

Right about now you may be thinking, "Gee, David, that's all just fascinating, but the truth is, assuming I care what the Bible says, I don't believe it's inerrant. That's why I go to a Unitarian church."

And I get that, but I still think we should care. Because the world we navigate every day is filled with people who care a lot about the Bible. Our family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. And sometimes it's helpful – when they might pull out a passage like Second Timothy – to be able to engage them about it thoughtfully.

Not to get into a debate with them. I don't think it's usually productive to get into religious arguments or act dismissively about someone else's beliefs or make fun of them. At least, not in person. That's what Facebook is for, apparently.

But at the same time, we all have opportunities to help people think outside the box. To shed some light where there may be shadows. Not that you and I possess all knowledge and ought to act superior. As fun as that may be. It's just that so many folks have not been exposed to some pretty basic facts about the Bible and how it was put together. What was left out of the Bible, and why.

And these are indeed verifiable facts, not something you're just making up about the Bible because you might not agree with it all the time.

The Bible as we know it today is the end result of a long process. During the first four hundred years of Christianity, different collections of writings were included in what were called canons. There was the Muratorian Canon in the year 170.

Then in the year 363 the Council of Laodicea added the books of the Old Testament – which Jewish Rabbis had earlier decided on in another meeting in the year 250. This canon of the Old and New Testaments was further refined by the Council of Hippo in 393. And then the Council of Carthage met in 397 and pretty much set things the way they are today.

These councils were made up of local bishops who would argue for or against including writings that were popular in the churches from their area. They used criteria like: 1) Was the author an apostle or have a close connection with an apostle? 2) Is the book being accepted by most Christians? 3) Did the book contain consistency of doctrine and orthodox teaching? 4) Did the book bear evidence of high moral and spiritual values that would reflect the Holy Spirit?

Even very conservative Christians today who believe the Bible is inerrant are well aware that these councils met and this process of selection took place. It's in the historical record. But in their view, the bishops who made up these councils actually did not do the picking and choosing of what would make it into the Bible.

No, in the view of conservatives, God told them directly what to include and what not to include. In these meetings, there were no politics involved, or turf battles, or personal grievances, or compromises or backroom deals made, like what happens when most groups of humans get together. Not at all. These were faithful men obediently following God's direct command.

But for the average Christian today, they don't even know *that* much. In most churches, how the Bible came to be the Bible is rarely if ever discussed. Because it could raise some uncomfortable questions.

Like, "So, what got left out, and why?"

Well, an awful lot of writings were left out. Writings that were very near and dear to early Christian communities. To answer the question of why, you can safely say that the majority of people on those councils over the years didn't think those writings met the standards I mentioned earlier.

But they're important for us to know about, because these gospels and letters that were left on the cutting room floor show us how incredibly diverse the early Christians were; what they believed about who Jesus was, and what their relationship was to God.

Today, some of it sounds truly bizarre, but only because we're familiar with what did make it into the Bible. But just because it's familiar, is it any less bizarre? For instance: God impregnates a young woman whose child is then visited by mysterious astrologers from Persia.

Some of the rejected books were from Gnostic communities. The Gnostics believed in a mysterious and selective method of being in communion with God, and only a select few could gain this secret knowledge.

There was a gospel supposedly written by James, the brother of Jesus, which has a lot more information in it about Mary and Joseph before Jesus was born. Then there's the Gospel of Philip, which suggests that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were more than just friends; in fact they were married.

Hmm. I wonder why that one got left out.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene itself suggests that Jesus was really all about encouraging people to gain inner spiritual knowledge – much like Buddhism – and it makes clear that women should be equal to men in the leadership of the church. And the Gospel of Thomas focuses mostly on sayings of Jesus – not what he did – and how most people did not understand what Jesus was saying, and that Jesus really never said he would ever be coming back.

Among the epistles – or letters – that were rejected, there was the one written by Titus, which argues that any kind of sexual intimacy, even within marriage, leads to damnation. Following that advice obviously would've led to a severe shortage of future Christians.

In all that we know of, there were fifteen Gospels, five Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Epistles, and a number of Apocalypses and Secret Books that failed to make the cut.

Under the Roman Emperor Constantine, Christianity had been legitimized in the year 313, and that newfound freedom of expression meant an explosion of creativity in Christian thinking.

It also meant that during the fourth century, as Christianity was becoming a large movement within the Empire, all those competing ideas and writings floating around were making things unmanageable. Local government officials didn't know how to handle disputes between Christians in neighboring cities and villages.

All these squabbling Christians could even pose a danger to the stability of the Empire. To preserve the peace, and to preserve the faith, some consistency was needed. So the councils were assembled to sort things out. To decide what would be in the Bible and what would not, once and for all.

And once that process was complete, the writings left out were not merely "lost," but wherever they could be found, they were destroyed. The lost scriptures we know about were those that were hidden, buried, and stashed away in jars. They became the stuff of legend, and in some cases, were only rediscovered in the past hundred years or so.

But by that time, only the writings that were included in the canon way back in the fourth century were considered to be the Bible. They had been so long established as the only true scripture, few people ever questioned it.

While that makes sense, I think it's too bad.

I happen to believe Christianity is pretty diverse even within the confines of what the Bible contains. We don't often see that diversity expressed very well, because people have the habit of picking and choosing and believing in bits and pieces of the Bible that already affirm their biases. I guess that's just human nature, and I'm just as guilty of doing that as anyone.

At the same time, you and I stand for a way of thinking about religion that is open-minded and inclusive and inquisitive. Whether it's Christianity or any other faith, we need to know as much as we can about it, how it came about, how and why people have the beliefs they do.

And when those beliefs ever cause injustice or injury to anyone, we're compelled not only to disagree, but to point out that any religion, at any time or place, cannot claim to possess all knowledge about all things. A little humility and a little grace can do wonders.

Scriptures of any kind are the result of long a human process. And even humans who believe they are inspired by God to write and compile scripture are not perfect. They're only human.