

32963 Article 11-19-09

Rev. Drs. Casey and Robert Baggott
The Community Church of Vero Beach

Bible 101

Recently we had the privilege of traveling to a large church-related campground on the New Jersey shore to teach Bible study for a week. There, every morning, a large group of interested and faithful folk gathered for an hour to study together the stories and materials of the Bible that have informed, shaped, and structured their lives. It struck us as a real curiosity, that while the gathered group shared reverence for the Bible, they did not necessarily share the same perspective on how to read and understand it.

How do you read and understand the Bible? A good place to begin reflecting on that question may be to refresh ourselves on what the book we call the Bible actually is. Dr. John A. Cairns has recently written an interesting article for *The Thoughtful Christian* entitled "Bible 101" in which he gives a thorough and helpful history on the Bible's composition and formation. Here are some of his salient points: The Bible is not a single book, but a composite, made up of 66 separate books, written or transmitted by a number of authors, using a variety of forms of literature, and two very different languages, over a period of more than a thousand years. While there is some disagreement among scholars about a few particulars, there is a general consensus on the following breakdown. The thirty-nine books of the Christian Hebrew Testament (the "Old Testament") can be categorized under four headings: law, history, poetry, and prophecy. The Jewish faith utilizes these same books, but organizes them differently and categorizes them under three headings: Law (or Torah), prophecy, and writings.

The Christian New Testament (written in Greek) can also be divided by the types of material contained in its twenty-seven books. The first four books are commonly called the Gospels. They detail the "good news" (that's what gospel means) of the life, message, passion, and resurrection triumph of Jesus Christ. The Acts of the Apostles describes the history of the first-century church in the time after Jesus' resurrection. The bulk of the rest of the New Testament is twenty-one letters sent to and from church leaders and congregations, aimed at giving shape to the young church and substance to its faith and practice. And finally, the book of Revelation provides us with an example of a literary style called apocalyptic writing (meaning literally, a removing of a veil, or a revealing), which was designed to provide hope and encouragement to those living under persecution because of their faith.

So, with its sixty-six different books, written over the course of over one thousand years, to different audiences, about different issues, in different languages, in different literary forms, what are we to make of this incredible treasure we call the Bible? Is it even reasonable to look at it as a single "book?" Dr. Cairns insists that it is. And he helpfully points out why. The Bible (in all of its variety), he contends, has a marvelous internal consistency. And all the thousands of verses have been preserved, copied, translated and transmitted for us in order to address two basic issues: "What is God like?" and "Who does God ask us to be?" All the marvelous and intriguing themes of the Bible are related to these two questions. And so, when we read of love and faithfulness, of sin and forgiveness, of being lost and found, of slavery and salvation -- these are all themes that arise in addressing the questions of who God is and who we are called to be.

If we can remember that we are all seeking greater understanding of these questions, and utilizing the greatest book ever written (the Bible) to do so, then we will perhaps appreciate one another's religious and spiritual paths despite our differences. After all, when all is said and done, isn't there more that binds us together than separates us in the worship of God?