

The Church Receives the Canon, Parts 3-4

Sources:

Scripture Alone, James R. White

The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible, Paul D. Wegner

The Doctrine of the Word of God, John M. Frame

Can We Still Believe the Bible? An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions, by Craig L. Blomberg

How We Got the Bible, Neil R. Lightfoot

The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures, D.A. Carson, editor

The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Considering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs, Craig L. Blomberg

The Origin of the Bible, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, Philip Comfort, Carl F.H. Henry

Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books, Michael J. Kruger

How did the church affect which books ended up in the New Testament? Nine foundational assertions:

1. The term *church*, as used here, refers to all true believers, not to a formal church structure or central authority, nor to those who are professing to be Christians but are not.
2. The church didn't commission the books: God "commissioned" them.
3. The church didn't pre-determine the canon: God predetermined it.
4. The church didn't determine the canon after it was written: it had already been determined by God.
5. It was God's purpose that the church possess the canon, i.e., that Christians have access to the word of Christ so that the sheep could hear the Shepherd's voice.
6. God usually accomplishes His purposes through normal human means. Therefore we expect that the church recognized and publicized the canon through normal processes.
 - a. We do not deny that the church had a role (see #8).
 - b. Human involvement is not the same thing as a "purely human affair" (Kruger, 35), as so many assume.
 - c. We do not expect to find that all professing Christians unanimously agreed.
7. The Scriptures from God demonstrate unique divine qualities – they can be distinguished from purely human literature.
8. Because of the presence of the Spirit in the church, the church will be able to recognize those books that are truly from God (John 10:27; 1 Corinthians 2:12-14).
 - a. The cause of this is sometimes called the *testimonium*, the testimony of the Spirit indwelling the church.
 - b. This is why we do not deny that the church had a role.
 - c. The role is one of receiving, recognizing, and submitting to the canon, not creating, choosing, or establishing it.
 - d. This does not mean that each individual Christian can select his own canon: we are referring to the Spirit's work in the church as a whole.
9. If the Scriptures are from God and the canon was established through His providential hand, then no human reason or historical evidences will ever be able to "prove" the canon. However, the historical evidence plays an important role in confirming the processes that Christians expect would have happened (and making it very unlikely that other processes, suggested by critics, could have happened).

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1:

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.
5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

Jeremiah 31:31-33

Ezekiel 11:19-20

Ezekiel 36:26-27

How would we expect the Bible to spread and be accepted?

Writings

Initial Copying

Delivery

Authentication:

- By facts: high view of Apostles
- By the Spirit

Passing it along to other churches:

- More authentication

Making additional copies

Spreading to other regions:

- More authentication
- A slow process with many limitations

An early core of New Covenant Scriptures begins to be broadly recognized

Some disagreements along the way:

- In areas where authentication was more difficult
- With smaller books from more specific settings
- Because of theological questions
- Because Christians are still sinners, so they disagree when they don't need to

Beginning to combine books together: not the whole NT, but smaller collections like the gospels or writings of Paul

Sharing collections with other regions

Beginning to write about the Scriptures:

- Quoting them with authoritative phrases like "the Scripture says"
- Paralleling them to the Old Covenant Scriptures
- Writing literature about them, such as sermons and commentaries
- Faithful writers would *not* claim that they were writing Scripture
- In general, words and writing would be important to Christians, and the historical evidence would show that

Heretical teachings would be promoted, opposing the "faith once for all delivered"

- Sometimes even genuine believers would be temporarily led astray, causing confusion
- Church leaders would have to have open discussion about various types of literature:
 - Scripture

- Probably Scripture, but some disagreements
- Valuable Christian literature, but not Scripture
- Dangerous / heretical literature to be rejected

More formal lists of the New Testament Scriptures might be needed:

- Lists would show agreement at the core, some disagreement on the fringes

Early Bibles would include primarily canonical books (the manuscript evidence would support the canon)

Manuscripts that remain would be predominantly the canonical books, because they were revered, widely accepted, and copied in much greater quantities. (Noncanonical books would not in the long term have the impact on true Christians that the Scriptures themselves would have, and that would show in the actual physical evidence.)

General consensus about the canon begins to become fairly clear

Lists would become more standard and formalized

General consensus would continue throughout the centuries / millennia that follow, because of God's purpose to give His word to the church and the world

A.D. 40s - 100

“These [27 books in the New Testament] are the only Christian writings we know of that can confidently be dated to the first century.” (Blomberg, 54)

The historical evidence indicates that the New Testament writings were *the* Christian writings in the first century. This means that the following ideas are not supported by historical facts:

- *that the New Testament teaching about Jesus was a later distortion of the real Jesus.* There is no historical evidence of other “Jesus teachings” from before or during the time of the New Testament gospels. They are *the* ancient historical records about Jesus.
- *that there were many early Christian writings that competed for inclusion in the canon.* The New Testament documents are *the* Christian writings from the first two generations after the death of Jesus.
- *that there were numerous early Christianities, and only one of them “won” over the others.* The historical evidence does not support the idea of other “Christianities” in the 1st century. Other doctrines only emerged generations after the New Testament as a response to it.

A.D. 100-150

A Core Develops

“There is evidence that within thirty years of the apostle’s death [John’s] all the Gospels and Pauline letters were known and used in all those centers from which any evidence has come down to us.” (Fisher in Bruce, 70)

There was “never any dispute on the unique nature and authoritative role” of 17 of the NT books, and very little dispute about 3 more (1-2 Timothy, Titus). (Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible*, 55)

The books that “radical scholars today wish to discredit” the most are, remarkably, the books that were most broadly and immediately accepted in early Christianity: “the Gospels, the Acts, and the major epistles of the New Testament.” “There is no significant dispute from the early centuries of Christianity” about any of these books. (Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 652)

“By this time, a substantial collection of Paul’s letters (exactly how many is unclear), the four canonical Gospels, and a number of other books (Hebrews, 1 John, Revelation, etc.) were functioning as authoritative documents for early Christian communities.” (Kruger, 225)

The writings of the apostolic fathers provide evidence

First, they quoted and paraphrased primarily from the New Testament:

From the early apostolic fathers (up through about A.D. 150), it is clear that there were three categories of books that they quoted during this very early stage: “(1) core NT books (cited very frequently), (2) peripheral NT books (cited less frequently), and (3) apocryphal/noncanonical books (cited hardly at all).” (Kruger, 224-225)

“Citations from apocryphal gospels and of other books that were later excluded from the canon do not begin to compete with the frequency of citation of the basic core.” (Barton, cited in Kruger, 224)

Second, they quoted and alluded to the New Testament core in a way that showed they viewed these books as having authority:

“We have a plethora of quotations of and allusions to many of the New Testament documents in that largely early second-century body of literature known as the apostolic fathers. There is regularly a sense that they are cited as authoritative, sometimes uniquely so, occasionally called Scripture, and once in a while put on par with the Old Testament works.”
(Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 650)

Third, they did not ever claim to be writing Scripture.

Fourth, though they did not possess all of the New Testament books (which we would not expect to have happened yet), there is clear evidence that they possessed some or all of the core. (The material that follows comes primarily from Wegner 140-142, Kruger 211-228, and Fisher in Bruce 70-71)

Clement of Rome (around A.D. 100) clearly understood the authority of the Apostles as designated by Christ, refers to Paul’s writings “in the Spirit,” and seems to refer to seven NT books.

The *Didache*, an early Christian manual of church practice from about A.D. 100, seems to use a quote from the gospel of Matthew, saying that this is “as the Lord commanded in his gospel.” It also applies Deuteronomy 4:2 to refer to the teachings of Jesus (don’t add or take away, but guard them).

Ignatius (around A.D. 100) seems to refer to nine NT books. He referred to several epistles of Paul, and talks about the absolute authority of the Apostles.

Polycarp (@ A.D. 110) seems to refer to at least sixteen NT books. He quotes Ephesians 4:26 and calls it Scripture, and alludes to several other epistles of Paul.

“The first three outstanding church fathers, Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius, used the bulk of the material of the New Testament in a revealingly casual manner – authenticated Scriptures were being accepted as authoritative without argument. In the

writings of these men only Mark, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and 2 Peter are not clearly attested.” (Fisher in Bruce, 70)

Epistle of Barnabas (@ A.D. 130), a theological work that was popular among early Christians, quotes Matthew 22:14 with the phrase normally reserved for Old Testament quotations: “as it is written.”

Papias (@ A.D. 125) refers to a gospel of Matthew, talks about how Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote on his behalf, quotes from Luke, and seems to have been aware of John’s gospel.

Justin Martyr (mid-100s) seems to be aware of about a dozen NT books, calls the gospels the “memoirs of the apostles,” taught that Christ spoke with authority through the Apostles, and may have had a combined collection of all four gospels.

A sense of new covenant Scripture (like old covenant Scripture) began to develop

One of the only known competing “lists” put the pressure on

Around A.D. 140, a man named Marcion defined his own canon. This rejected the Old Testament, rejected three of the gospels, and accepted essentially only the gospel of Luke and letters of Paul.

A.D. 150-200

“There is evidence that within thirty years of the apostle’s death [John’s] all the Gospels and Pauline letters were known and used in all those centers from which any evidence has come down to us. It is true that some of the smaller letters were being questioned as to their authority in some quarters for perhaps another fifty years [until A.D. 170-190], but this was due only to uncertainty about their authorship in those particular locales. This demonstrates that acceptance was not being imposed by the actions of councils but was rather happening spontaneously through a normal response on the part of those who had learned the facts about authorship. In those places where the churches were uncertain about the authorship or apostolic approval of certain books, acceptance was slower.” (Fisher in Bruce, 70)

Challenges continued to develop

“Periodic outbreaks of increasingly intense persecution of believers by the Roman state ... meant that Christians had more than enough motive to clarify which books they deemed sacred and authoritative and for which they would be willing to die if necessary.” (Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible*, 66)

The Roman persecution included “the potential for being executed simply for owning Christian literature. Those believers with enough means or in positions of leadership that allowed them to own Christian books had to determine which ones they were willing to die for.” (Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, 652)

Collections began to form

The core became even firmer

“By the middle of the second century there appears to be a ‘core’ NT canon widely recognized by early Christians. This core consisted of the four Gospels, Paul’s epistles, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and perhaps a few others.” (Kruger, 231)

“Astonishingly early, the great central core of the present New Testament was already being treated as the main authoritative source for Christians.” (Barton, cited in Kruger, 231-232)

“Therefore, dramatic claims that the canon was not finalized until the fourth century may be true on a technical level [because there was still some debate about a few books on the ‘edge’ of the canon], but often miss the larger and more important point, namely, that the core of the canon had already been in place (and exhibiting scriptural authority) for centuries.” (Kruger, 232)

The core became even firmer: evidence from Bible manuscripts

- Compared to other ancient literature of any kind, the sheer quantity of New Testament manuscripts is remarkable. The New Testament was obviously very popular in the A.D. 100s and 200s.
- The fact that manuscripts from this time period combined multiple books shows that Christians were thinking of these books as fitting together into a collection.
- Non-canonical books are rarely combined with canonical books in manuscripts. Especially remarkable is that “we possess no instance where an apocryphal gospel is joined with canonical Gospels within a single manuscript.” (Kruger, 242)
- If you simply count the number of surviving manuscripts of canonical books compared to non-canonical books (from the 100s-200s), the canonical books outnumber non-canonical books 4 to 1. There are more manuscript portions from the Gospel of John than from all non-canonical books combined.
- The ancient evidence shows that Christians were serious about words, writing, and books. Theirs was obviously not merely a religion of oral tradition, but authoritative writings.
- The Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures continued to prefer to roll their writings (into scrolls) for centuries after the majority of Christians had switched to the newer book format. Why? It is possible that this was because the Christians had important documents to join together – like four gospels, or the epistles of Paul – that could not fit into a scroll. The book format allowed for larger collections of New Testament Scriptures, and so the majority of ancient New Testament manuscripts are pages from books (rather than portions of scrolls, as with most other writings from the same time period).
- 2 Timothy 4:13 indicates that as early as the end of Paul’s life the Christian writings were beginning to be combined into books rather than scrolls.

The core became even firmer: evidence from the earliest lists (after Marcion)

The Muratorian Fragment (c. A.D. 190)

Available online at: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/muratorian.html>

- The role of the Holy Spirit, the authority of the apostles, and the unity of the gospels are all discussed in the document.
- The “criteria” for canonicity are discussed in the document, especially matters like:

- Was the book written by an apostle, or at least someone of recognized authority?
- Did it agree with the gospel of the apostles?
- Did it enjoy universal acceptance?
- Does it have a self-authenticating divine nature?
- The core New Testament canon that is listed includes 22 or 23 of our 27 books.
- Some clearly heretical books are discussed and rejected. The *Shepherd of Hermas* is dismissed because it comes from a time clearly after the apostles. The *Apocalypse of Peter* is mentioned as used by some Christians but not others; and the *Wisdom of Solomon* (an Old Testament apocryphal book) is mentioned as being read in some churches.

Dr. Lee McDonald has published a compilation of the 30 earliest lists of New Testament books, ranging from the A.D. 100s to the 500s. (This is available online at <http://www.bible.ca/b-canon-NT-collections-macdonald.htm>) If you compile those 30 lists together, you find:

- The 27 New Testament books
- A total of 14 other books are mentioned at least once, and some of these included a note that these were appropriate for church use but did not have divine authority as Scripture. They include:
 - The *Shepherd of Hermas* occurs on 5 lists
 - The *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, and *Apocalypse of Peter* each appear on 3 lists
 - 10 other books (most of which were orthodox Christian writings) appear on 1 list

What does this mean? First, it means that there is no evidence that books like the Gospel of Thomas were seriously considered for inclusion in the New Testament. Second, it means that there were not nearly as many “alternative” books as critics like to suggest. The total number of alternative books included on the 30 lists is only 14. Third, it means that the New Testament core was remarkably clear.

For a clear comparison chart of books included in various lists, see <http://www.ntcanon.org/table.shtml>

To read for yourself from the ancient lists and words of the early church fathers about the canon, a very helpful resource is found at <http://www.ntcanon.org/authorities.shtml>

The core became even firmer: evidence from Irenaeus

Irenaeus was a church leader and author in France who wrote in the A.D. 170s-180s. Irenaeus is of special interest because he sat under the ministry of another Christian leader named Polycarp who sat under the ministry of the apostle John. In his writings, he quotes or refers to more than a thousand New Testament passages from at least 22 and probably 24 of the 27 books.

Other Developments in A.D. 150-200

The term “New Testament” first appeared in Christian literature

Translations and commentaries of New Testament books began to multiply

A.D. 200-300

Heretical books emerged with more frequency, increasing the urgency of defining the canon

The core continued to be clear, while public discussions of canonicity increased

Fisher writes that the 200s was a time when “the collecting of books into a whole ‘New Testament’ was underway, together with a sifting process which was separating them from other Christian literature.” (Fisher in Bruce, 68-69)

Tertullian was a Christian author and apologist in the early 200s who listed 23 New Testament books.

Origen was a Christian theologian in the early 200s who listed three categories of books:

- Widely acknowledged: 21 New Testament books
- Doubted by some: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, along with the *Didache*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Preaching of Peter*, and *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Most of those extra-canonical writings were largely orthodox Christian writings, except the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.
- Rejected completely: a variety of heretical gospels and acts, especially Gnostic works

In the late 200s or early 300s, **Eusebius** (a church leader and historian) wrote directly about the canon. He listed:

- 22 New Testament books as universally acknowledged
- 5 books as widely known but sometimes disputed: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John
- He also listed other books that were to be rejected either because they were orthodox but not Scripture, or unorthodox (heretical). This included works like the *Shepherd of Hermas* and *Apocalypse of Peter*.

A.D. 300-400

The twenty-seven book New Testament became common

Eusebius (above) could be included here, as he may have written in the early 300s.

“The major [early] biblical codices [manuscripts in book form] – Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Alexandrinus – each contain all twenty-seven books of our New Testament ... divided into four clear collections: the four Gospels, the Pauline Epistles (including Hebrews), Acts and the General Epistles, and Revelation.” (Kruger, 247)

Codex Vaticanus (c. A.D. 300-325), one of the earliest complete Bibles, contained 22 of the 27 New Testament books, but the missing books seem to have been included in the original book (the missing books are the last five books in the New Testament, and that portion appears to have been lost from the book).

Codex Sinaiticus (c. A.D. 330-360), another of the earliest complete Bibles, contains the 27 books of the New Testament plus *Shepherd of Hermas* and *Epistle of Barnabas*.

Athanasius (c. A.D. 296-373) was a prominent church leader and theologian who published a declaration of the 27 New Testament books in what is called his *39th Festal Letter* of A.D. 367. He mentioned other books like *Shepherd of Hermas* that could be read for instruction but were not part of the canon of Scripture. Available at http://www.ntcanon.org/Athanasius.shtml#Festal_Letter

“But the order is important to observe: When Athanasius wrote his *39th Festal Letter* (A.D. 367), listing the same New Testament canon we use today and the Protestant Old Testament canon, he was neither ‘creating’ the canon nor ‘originating’ the knowledge of it. He was reflecting, as a bishop, the work the Spirit had already been accomplishing for nearly three centuries.” (White, 108)

The Latin **Vulgate**, from the late A.D. 300s, had 27 books (though a small percentage [4% or less] of the Vulgate manuscripts include the *Epistle to the Laodiceans*).

Church Councils:

A.D. 325 Nicaea

There are no official records that indicate that Nicaea made any decisions about the canon. You can read all of the official statements of Nicaea at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3801.htm>. Extensive citations from original historical sources about Nicaea are available at <http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/nicaea.html>.

Is there any evidence that the canon was even discussed at Nicaea? I can find two:

1. There is one note in Jerome’s prologue to the Old Testament apocryphal book of Judith (available at <http://www.bombaxo.com/prologues.html>) which says that “this book is found by the Nicene Council to have been counted among the number of the Sacred Scriptures...”
2. Thomas Aquinas, in the 1200s, wrote about Hebrews that “...it must be known that before the Council of Nicaea some doubted whether this epistle was really by the Apostle Paul.”

A few years later Constantine did commission the printing of some Bibles, but we don’t know which books were in these Bibles.

A.D. 363 Council of Laodicea

Officially listed 26 of the 27 books, without Revelation possibly because of its widespread use by heretics in their area. You can read the statement of the council (along with a question of the historical validity) at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/laodicea.html>.

A.D. 393 Hippo / A.D. 397 Carthage

These two councils apparently listed the 27-book New Testament. (For the text, and discussion of the relationship between the two councils, see <http://www.bible-researcher.com/carthage.html>)

Even one of the fiercest New Testament critics, Bart Ehrman, writes that “The canon of the New Testament was ratified by widespread consensus rather than by official proclamation.” (*Lost Christianities*, 231)

After A.D. 400

The Roman Catholic Church formally defined their canon (including the 27-book New Testament) at the Council of Trent in A.D. 1563.

Two foundational concepts about the canon from A.D. 400 – now:

1. Discussions about the canon did continue. There was not a sudden shutdown by the government or church that silenced any further questions. For many centuries to come, other books would occasionally appear on the fringe of the New Testament. For example:
 - Codex Alexandrinus (c. A.D. 400-440) contained the 27 New Testament books plus 1 and 2 Clement.
 - The *Epistle to the Laodiceans* appears in more than 100 manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate from the 500s on.
 - Thomas Aquinas, a very influential theologian in the 1200s, discussed questions about the canonicity of the book of Hebrews.
 - Martin Luther questioned Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation because of his theological reservations about their teachings.
2. There was a remarkable degree of agreement that has continued until today. If we set aside for a moment the arguments about the Old Testament apocrypha (which arguments receive far more attention than they probably deserve), it is important to note that from the A.D. 300s until today there has been dominant agreement among all professing Christians – including modern Roman Catholics and Protestants – about the 27 books of the New Testament canon.

But it is also very important to recognize that this agreement, discussed under #2, did not suddenly begin through some church or government decision in the A.D. 300s. The historical evidence clearly points to a very natural *process* of recognizing the books from God. This process began long before the 300s, as a core of New Testament books, including the gospels and writings of Paul, was recognized and nearly unanimously accepted within just one or two generations of its writing. By the 300s that natural process led to widespread agreement on the full 27-book New Testament which continues to be accepted by Christians around the world today.