

## The Church Receives the Canon, Part 2

**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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 AD 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)

### ***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.