

THE FORMULATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CANON

By

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The term “canon” is derived from the Greek *kanon*, which originally meant a “reed,” but later has been changed to mean a “rod” or a “bar.” It refers to a measuring stick used to draw a straight line or to measure distances. When applied to a body of literature such as the Scriptures, the word “canon” refers to the books in the Bible recognized as inspired and authoritative for faith and practice.

Contrary to what many think, the church did not create the canon by formally assembling in a meeting and deciding by vote which letters were authoritative and which were not. Instead, the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were received (Latin: *recipimus*) as authoritative by the church over a period of several hundred years, and the church submitted itself to its inherent authority. The arduous process of canonization began in early second century and ended in the middle of fourth century, almost two and a half centuries after the last New Testament book was written. By the close of the fourth century, the church recognized the inspiration, merits, unity, and the spiritual effects of the books presently contained in the New Testament. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, was the first to publish in AD 367 a list of twenty-seven books, which happen to be the same books that we have in the New Testament.

The process of canonization involved debates and arguments regarding the antiquity of the circulated letters, authorship, and how widely they were received and used by the early church. By the beginning of second century, Christians in the early church had already received as authoritative the teachings of Jesus Christ and the writings of the apostles (1 Cor. 7: 10, 25; 1 Thess. 4:15; 1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Pet. 3:15-16). Moreover, Jesus and the apostles had accepted the Torah, the prophetic oracles, and the writings as inspired word of God (Matt. 12:39-41; 1 Cor. 9:9; 13-14). The early church did not have the New Testament as we have it today. Different churches had different collections of writings, and in some cases, different versions of an epistle due to variations introduced while copying by hand.

It is important to keep in mind that not all of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were accepted at first as canonical. Twenty of the twenty-seven books were accepted early on as canonical or considered *homologomena* (speaking the same things about). Seven books—Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation—were regarded *antilegomena* (the spoken against ones). They were in dispute for many years and eventually were received as inspired and authoritative. Briefly, the principles governing canonization were:

- a. **Authorship:** Apostolic authorship was considered the foremost criterion for canonization. Epistles attributed to apostles who were intimately associated with Jesus Christ and His ministry and who were eye-witnesses to His resurrection were regarded as canonical. Although Paul was not intimately associated with the earthly ministry of Jesus, he had an encounter with Christ and claimed that his apostleship was through Christ (Gal. 1:1). Moreover, he maintained that he had received the gospel through the revelation of Christ (Gal. 1:11-12; 1 Thess. 2:13).
- b. **Church’s testimony:** As different epistles and writings began to circulate in the churches of Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, Rome, Colossae, and other parts of Asia Minor, some were received as inspired and others were rejected as uninspired. Inspiration of a book was recognized by its apostolic authorship, content, ethical and moral effect, and the

testimony of the church. The continued testimony of the early churches and their usage of these letters was a powerful attestation of the authority of these books.

- c. **Doctrinal reliability:** The doctrinal content of the letters accepted as canonical is indisputably centered on the person of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work. They impart sound teaching without contradictions. In contrast, the apocryphal Gospels and other heretical writings show many internal contradictions, especially when compared to the teachings of the Old Testament, and are more focused on “miracle-mongering” than they are with teaching. “In precision of narrative, in depth of teaching, and in concentration on the person of Christ, there is a discernible difference between the canonical and the non-canonical books.”¹
- d. **External testimony:** An important factor considered in the process of canonization was the extent to which the circulated letters were used or quoted by early church fathers. In the period between AD 100 and AD 200, Polycarp, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian of Carthage, Irenaeus of Lyons, and others extensively used the letters we have today in the New Testament. Irenaeus, for example, used and quoted at length all four Gospels, Acts, epistles of Paul, many of the general epistles, and Revelation. Tertullian of Carthage quoted from all of the New Testament letters except Philemon, James, 2 and 3 John. Justin Martyr, a Syrian Greek, regarded all the four Gospels and many of the epistles of Paul as canonical. He said that it was customary to read these epistles along with portions of the Old Testament during Sunday worship.

During the years AD 200–400, Origen of Alexandria used extensively the twenty books (*homologomena*) in his writings. While he had some concern about *antilegomena* books, he eventually accepted all twenty-seven books. Jerome who translated the Bible into Latin regarded all twenty-seven books as canonical. It is worth noting that since the close of the fourth century, there have been no material changes in the recognized canon.

The development of the Christian canon was a response to Gnosticism and Marcionism that threatened the early church. By the end of the second century, the church had established the *Muratorian* canon. It consisted all the four gospels—Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John—Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, letters of John, Jude, and Revelation. By the time the famous councils of the fourth century were held, the twenty-seven books we have in the New Testament had already been received as authoritative. “Some were recognized more slowly than others because of the smallness of their size, their remote or private destination or anonymity of authorship, or their seeming lack of applicability to the immediate ecclesiastical need. None of these factors mitigates against the inspiration of any of these books, or against its right to its place in the authoritative word of God.”²

A word on why Apocrypha is not considered Scripture by the Protestant Church. The most important reason is that the Jews have rejected the Apocrypha as Scripture. They have rejected it because of many historical inaccuracies and teachings promoting lying, scheming, murder, and any means that justify the end. The Apocrypha is largely made of legendary stories and myths. Moreover, Christ and the apostles never cited or quoted from Apocrypha.³ While the Protestant church rejects the Apocrypha as inspired Scripture, it recognizes its value in providing information and insights into the culture, life, thinking, and theology of the ancient Jews.

1. Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 403.

2. *Ibid.*, 411.

3. James Borland, *A General Introduction to the New Testament* (Lynchburg: University Book House, 1986), 64-67.