The New Testament Canon

The early Christian church followed the practice of Jesus and regarded the Old Testament as authoritative (Matt. 5:17–19; 21:42; 22:29; Mark 10:6–9; 12:29–31). Along with the Old Testament, the church revered the words of Jesus with equal authority (1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Thess. 4:15). It could not have been otherwise since Jesus was perceived not only as a prophet but also as the Messiah, the Son of God. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostles came to occupy a unique position in spreading and bearing witness to the words of Jesus. Indeed, Christ had said of them that because they had been with Him from the beginning they would be His witnesses (John 15:27).

As the church grew, and the apostles became conscious of the prospect of their own deaths, the need arose for the words of Jesus to be recorded (2 Pet. 1:12–15). None were keener to preserve and communicate authoritatively what had happened than the apostles who were witnesses of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ. Thus, the stage was set for the development of books that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, would in time become the New Testament canon.

For about two decades after the Cross, the message of Jesus was proclaimed orally. Then, from the mid–first century on, Paul's letters began to appear. Somewhat later, the three synoptic Gospels and the book of Acts were written; by the end of the first century, when John wrote the book of Revelation, all the books of the New Testament were completed. Throughout the New Testament, the focus is on what God had done in Christ (1 Cor. 15:1–3; Luke 1:1–3).

As was the case with the books of the Old Testament prophets, the writings of Paul and the other apostles were immediately accepted as authoritative because the authors were known to be authentic spokesmen for God. The writers themselves were conscious of the fact that they were proclaiming God's message, not merely their own opinions. Paul, in 1 Timothy 5:18, follows up the formula "*Scripture says*" with a quote from Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7, thereby placing the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament Gospels on the same level of authority; and, in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul commends the Christians in Thessalonica for accepting his words as "*the word of God*". (Peter in 2 Peter 3:15, 16 also considered Paul's writings as Scripture.)

During the second century, most churches came to possess and acknowledge a collection of inspired books that included the four Gospels, the book of Acts, 13 of Paul's letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John. The other seven books (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation) took longer to win general acceptance. The early church fathers—for example, Clement of Rome (ca. 100), Polycarp (ca. 70–155), and Ignatius (died ca. 115)—quoted from most of the New Testament books (only 2 and 3 John, and 2 Peter are not attested) in a manner indicating that they accepted these books as authoritative.

Over a period of about four centuries when the New Testament canon took shape (specifically defining the list of books), a number of factors played a significant role. While the primary reason for the inclusion of the New Testament books in the canon was the self-authenticating nature of the books (i.e., their inspiration), other issues contributed to it.

One key motivating factor for establishing the New Testament canon was that during the second century several heretical movements developed in Christianity. Marcion, a prominent heretic, broke with the church around A.D. 140, and drew up his own list of Christian books that would provide a canon for faith and worship. Marcion accepted only a modified version of Luke's Gospel and ten of the Pauline epistles as inspired. At the same time, a growing number of Christian writings appeared that claimed to relate unknown details about Christ and the apostles.

Many of these books were written by individuals who belonged to a heretical movement called "*Gnosticism*". The Gnostics stressed salvation through secret knowledge (Greek *gnosis*). A number of "*infancy*" gospels supplied details from the hidden years of Christ's life. Numerous apocryphal books of Acts related the deeds of Peter, Paul, John, and most of the other apostles, and several apocalypses described accounts of personally conducted tours of heaven and hell by the apostles. Today, these writings are known collectively as the New Testament Apocrypha.

This period also saw the publication of lists of books known to have been written by the apostles or their associates. Among these lists were the Muratorian Canon, dated towards the end of the second century, the list of Eusebius of Caesarea from the early part of the fourth century, and the list of Athanasius of Alexandria from the middle of the fourth century. The first two lists were still incomplete, containing only about 20 of the 27 New Testament books. The complete New Testament canon is set out in detail in Athanasius's Easter letter of 367, which contains the 27 New Testament books to the exclusion of all others. During the fourth century, several church synods, such as the Councils of Rome (382), Hippo (393), and Carthage (397), accepted all 27 books of the New Testament as canonical.

While heretical movements and church councils played a certain role in the formation of the canon, the desire to preserve faithfully the events of what God had done through Christ, already evident in the New Testament, means that the driving force behind the history of the New Testament canon was the faith of the church.

In fact, much of what became the core of the New Testament canon had already been unofficially and generally recognized as Scripture as the church began to consider making and approving a list that would set the limits of Christian Scripture. In reference to the New Testament canon, Bruce M. Metzger says of the Synod of Laodicea (364 AD): "*The decree adopted at this gathering merely recognizes the fact that there are already in existence certain books, generally recognized as suitable to be read in the public worship of the churches, which are known as the 'canonical' books*." (Note: the Book of Revelation was not included at this time).