



Canon: Which Books Belong?

Lesson Eight: The New Testament Canon

Many never question the integrity of the New Testament. Seldom asked is “How did we come to have twenty-seven books in the New Testament?” The New Testament was written within a period of fifty years and was composed several centuries after the Old Testament Canon closed. Christians can be absolutely certain of the integrity of the New Testament and this will be easily demonstrated in this lesson.

The New Testament was compiled in a relatively brief period of time (about fifty years). The principle used to provide the writings of the New Testament (John 14:26; 16:13). This guiding principle of the New Testament is the same that guided and provided the Old Testament—it is a product of Divine Inspiration! This governing principle allowed God to provide modern man with an infallible revelation of the Divine Truth. Thus, any book that is the product of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration is to be recognized as revealing God’s counsel for obeying Him. Those books thus recognized were compiled into a collection that we call the “New Testament.”

The fact that all twenty-seven books of the New Testament were recognized as inspired, while others were rejected, shows us that this principle guided the selection and collection of inspired books. We can be confident that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament is God’s revealed will, and the only revelation, to modern man. God’s overruling Providence made sure that the revealed Word was made available to others. Eventually Christians recognized that the collection of twenty-seven books in our New Testament was God’s “New” Testament to mankind.

THE PROCESS USED BY INSPIRATION TO PROVIDE GOD’S REVELATION TO MAN.

For almost twenty years after Christ’s ascension nothing was written. The story of salvation was communicated by oral communication. The only Scripture used was the Old Testament passages that spoke of Christ’s coming and salvation. Those receiving the oral message needed a more accurate record that applied the life and teachings of Christ to the lives of Christians. Thus the Epistles were written to address this need. Later with the aging and deaths of the “eye witnesses” there arose a need for an authentic account of Christ’s life to be recorded. The Gospels were written to satisfy this need (John’s Gospel was written later). Acts was needed to furnish an authentic history of the Apostolic period. Revelation was needed to present God’s revelation of the Divine Plan.

After a letter was written it would be circulated and copied. Eventually they were collected. This process of collecting the letters indicates how the early Christians recognized the authority of these letters to direct their religious lives. The letters of Paul were among those collected first (2 Peter 3:15). From about 150 A.D. the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were

collected and regarded with reverence as God's revealed will. The New Testament books were recognized only if they passed the established tests of canonicity.

1. Authorship
2. Intrinsic worth
3. Consistency of doctrine
4. Acceptance of writings

Once writing passed these critical "tests," it would be received and regarded with the greatest of respect. One should remember that God's providence guided events so that only the inspired books would be accepted and canonized. A book was rejected or accepted because it demonstrated the qualities of inspiration!

- The New Testament Canon gradually grew until it was given final recognition as being the "complete" revealed will of God.
- There was an almost immediate recognition of a book's "inspiration" when it appeared.
- "7,029 verses of the 7,959 verses of the New Testament, or seven-eighths of the whole text" were recognized as inspired almost immediately (Pache, 177).
- The term "New Testament" was first used around 190 A.D.

DEBATE OVER THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON AROSE BECAUSE OF THE APOSTATE CHURCH

- During the Middle Ages the Church gained great power and imposed its view upon all others.
- The desire of the Church to dominate and control all aspects of religion brought it to place as religious authority: the Scriptures, Creeds, Councils, and Holy Tradition.
- The Reformation Movement sought to break this insistence upon "Church Authority."
- The Reformers did this by seeking to follow an infallible Bible rather than an infallible Church. This required an examination of the New Testament Canon.
- The Church hierarchies met at the Council of Trent (1546) and canonized the Apocryphal Books.

Christians can confidently trust the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are God's inspired, revealed, and recorded message.

SUMMARY THOUGHTS REGARDING THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

- We should have total confidence!
- We should feel compelled to obey the commands!