









Canon: Which Books Belong?

Lesson Eight: The New Testament Canon

1.  Many never question the integrity of the New Testament. Seldom are questions like these asked: How did we come to have twenty-seven books in the New Testament? Is there a valid basis for this number, or is it only traditional?
 - a. The New Testament was written within a period of fifty years and was composed several centuries after the Old Testament Canon closed.
 - b. Christians can be absolutely certain of the integrity of the New Testament and this will be easily demonstrated in this lesson.
2. The New Testament was compiled in a relatively brief period of time (about fifty years).
 - a.  The divine principle used to provide the writings of the New Testament.
 - 1) The Lord's words refer to this principle which would lead to the formulation of the New Testament being provided (John 14:26; 16:13).
 - 2) This guiding principle of the New Testament is the same that guided and provided the Old Testament—it is a product of Divine Inspiration! It (the New Testament) is “God-breathed.” This governing principle allowed God to provide modern man with an infallible revelation of the Divine Truth.
 - 3) 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.”
 - 4) 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. Thus, we can be confident in saying that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament is God's revealed will, and the only revelation, to modern man.
 - 5) The acceptance, or denial, by man of a book that was inspired did not matter. God's overruling Providence made sure that the revealed Word was made available to others.
 - 6) Eventually Christians recognized that the collection of twenty-seven books in our New Testament was God's “New” Testament to mankind.

- b.  The process used by Inspiration to provide God's revelation to man.
 - 1) 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.
 - 2) 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.
 - 3) 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).
 - 4) Acts was needed to furnish an authentic history of the Apostolic period.
 - 5) Revelation was needed to present God's revelation of the Divine Plan.
 - 6) Thus, these writings were collected and placed alongside the Old Testament. In such a form the Lord's Church would be able to research and know God's will for their lives.
 - a) After a letter was written it would remain a treasured possession of those who received it. In some cases the letters were circulated and copied. (Colossians 4:16)
 - b)  Eventually the letters were collected. Some places had more letters than others and some had different letters than others. 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).
 - c)  From about 150 A.D. the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were all collected together and regarded with reverence as God's revealed will (Thiessen, 9, 10).
3. The New Testament books were recognized only if they passed the established tests of canonicity. (Note: These "tests" were previously discussed in Lesson Six). The selection of books to be included in the New Testament Canon was achieved by a careful process. As a reminder, the following tests were applied to each book to determine its canonicity.
- a.  **AUTHORSHIP**
 - 1) The writing had to originate with an Apostle or from one closely associated with an Apostle.

- 2) This is known as the test of “Apostolicity.”
- 3) This test determined the status of the following books:
 - a) The **Gospel of Mark** because Mark was associated with Peter;
 - b) The **Gospel of Luke** and **Acts** because Luke was the companion of Paul;
 - c) The Books of **James** and **Jude** because they were the brothers of our Lord and were considered to be companions to the Apostles.
- 4) This test also caused problems for the **Epistle to the Hebrews**. The author is unknown and many credit it to Paul. There are other possibilities as well, and the lack of known authorship kept this Epistle among the debated books for many years.

b. 📖 **INTRINSIC WORTH**

- 1) If the book spoke with authority and its message surpassed the normal standards, its intrinsic worth caused it to be judged inspired.
- 2) The Epistle to the Hebrews was canonized because of this fact. The early Christians refused to discard this epistle even though authorship was unknown because of its value.
- 3) This factor was responsible for eliminating most Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal books. “The gap between the canonical and the non-canonical books is so wide, the difference is so clear, that it is easy to tell which books should be rejected...These apocryphal books are so inferior to the canonical works that comparison will show why they were rejected” (Neale Pryor, *You Can Trust Your Bible*, 37).

c. 📖 **CONSISTENCY OF DOCTRINE**

- 1) It was expected that any writing from God would be consistent in all aspects of doctrine and application.
- 2) In this point we can see the providence of God’s plan. The long ministry of the Apostles allowed Christians to become very familiar with inspired teaching (Acts 2:42) and writings (1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:15). This familiarity enabled the Christians to judge the writings and determine their validity.
- 3) It was this point that validated the Epistle of Jude.

d. 📖 **ACCEPTANCE OF WRITINGS**

- 1) Were the writings universally accepted or were they restricted to a particular region?

- 2) Many of the books were universally accepted and this allowed them to be canonized almost immediately (i.e. Paul's epistles, 2 Peter 3:15-16).
 - 3) Many of the Apocryphal Books were geographically limited and were thus eliminated.
 - 4) One of the tests of universality was the citation of the writings by authors in the early Church. The inspired texts were quickly recognized and used by authors writing about Christianity.
 - a) Peter referred to Paul (2 Peter 3:15-16). Paul quoted from Luke (1 Timothy 5:18; Luke 10:7).
 - b) Clement of Rome (c. 96 A.D.) quoted 1 Corinthians and other parts of the New Testament.
 - c) "It is very remarkable that, fifty years after the death of the last apostle, there were found in the writings of the defenders of the faith and also in those of heretics exact quotations from the whole New Testament (except for six or seven of the very shortest letters); both groups referred to it for their authority" (Pache, 175).
 - d) The commentaries and translations of the Early Church period established the fact that the New Testament writings were inspired while other religious writings, while respected and read, were thought to be non-inspired.
 - e. Once writing passed these critical "tests," it would be received and regarded with the greatest of respect! It is important to remember that the judgment passed upon these tests was human judgment, however such does not mean that man alone determined which books would be accepted. One should remember that God's providence guided events so that only the inspired books would be accepted and canonized. A book *was not* accepted as inspired because man liked it. A book was not rejected as inspired because man did not like it. A book was rejected or accepted because it demonstrated the qualities of inspiration!
4. The New Testament Canon did not instantly "pop" into existence! It gradually grew until it was given final recognition as being the "complete" revealed will of God.
 - a. 📖 Even though the full and formal recognition of a fixed canon of twenty-seven books did not appear until the 4th century, there was an almost immediate recognition of a book's "inspiration" when it appeared.
 - 1) "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).
 - 2) The term "New Testament" was first used around 190 A.D. and demonstrates that

believers viewed the “New” Testament on the same level of inspiration that the “Old” Testament shared (Comfort, p. 66).

- b. A specific list was not needed by the early Christians. They knew the writers and had first hand ability to discern the writing’s integrity. ☞ However gradually heretics began to lead others who had not known the writers or who had no access to credible sources of the Truth. Thus there arose the necessity to recognize the religious writings that could be trusted as “given by inspiration.”
- c. The real debate over the New Testament Canon did not begin until those who had known the writers had died and those whom they had instructed had also died.
 - 1) In the 4th Century a writing claiming to be the “Letter to the Laodiceans” appeared (Colossians 4:16). By the close of the 4th Century it was widely circulated. Between the 6th-15th Centuries it was placed in Paul’s Epistles. Yet later study proved that it was spurious.
 - 2) The New Testament Canon remained the same through the middle Ages. During this time the Church gained great power and imposed its view upon all others.
 - 3) The supreme 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.
 - 4) 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. Of course this required an examination of Canon. Ultimately, after again being examined, the 27 New Testament books were once again pronounced as the only inspired writings to man!
 - 5) With the Reformers’ attacks upon the unscriptural basis of many beliefs/practices, the seated Church hierarchies (from Rome and Constantinople) were faced with the problematic question of religious authority for beliefs and practices. These met at the Council of Trent (1546) and canonized the Apocryphal Books as “sacred and canonical and pronounced a curse upon anyone who does not so regard them” (Thiessen, 29). *Note:* History has amply recorded the reason why and the manners by which the “extra” or “apocryphal” books were canonized. Thus has been proven that these books gained the status of “canon” because of man’s dogmatic, self-ruled will, not upon the fact of divine origin. Such disqualifies them as Canon!
 - 6) The New Testament Canon was established very early (c. 150 A.D.). It was officially recorded in 367 A.D. “In his *Festal Letter* for Easter, 367, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria included information designed to eliminate once and for all the use of certain apocryphal books. This letter, with its admonition, ‘Let no one add to these; let nothing be taken away,’ gives the earliest extant document which specifies our

- twenty-seven books without qualification. At the close of the century the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) decreed that ‘aside from the canonical Scriptures nothing is to be read in church under the Name of Divine Scriptures.’ This too lists the twenty-seven books of the New Testament” (Comfort, 74).
- 7) The New Testament Canon was recognized by all significant lists.
 - a) *The Fragment of Muratori* (c. 170) includes all books except five books. Included were those books of the New Testament usually questioned (Revelation, Jude, two of John’s epistles). Since this was a fragment the absence of the five books is not significant.
 - b) *Clement of Alexandria*, toward the end of the second century, wrote a seven volume commentary on the books of the New Testament, including Jude and the other general epistles.
 5. ☞ Christians can confidently trust that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are God’s inspired, revealed, and recorded message. The resolution of any dilemma surrounding these writings is now considered.
 - a. ☞ What about the New Testament books that were under suspicion? These included: Hebrews, Revelation, James, 2 Peter, 2, 3 John, and Jude.
 - 1) *Hebrews* was questioned because of authorship. About 95 A.D. Clement of Rome said it was received as canonical. About 95 A.D. Clement of Alexandria said Paul had written it in Hebrew and Luke had translated it into Greek. Eventually the epistle to the Hebrews found unanimous agreement.
 - 2) *Revelation* was questioned but was one of the most defended documents of the New Testament. All early Church Fathers stated that John wrote it. All doubts disappeared and by the end of the century it was unanimously admitted.
 - 3) *James, 2 Peter, 2, 3 John, and Jude* were the last to be admitted. The objections to these were: too brief; too general; and the authors were not Apostles (James and Jude). During the Fourth Century these too were formerly accepted and the New Testament Canon was closed.
 - b. ☞ What about the books that were not permitted to be a part of the New Testament—The New Testament Apocrypha?
 - 1) Since the Old Testament Apocrypha existed it is not surprising that a similar body of literature grew up around the New Testament.
 - 2) A large assortment of religious literature appeared. These writings claimed to be inspired writings dealing with Christianity.

- a) These Apocryphal writings were divided into sections similar to the inspired writings of the New Testament.
 - i. Apocryphal Gospels and Passion Tales supplemented the New Testament accounts and sought to give credibility to religious error.
 - ii. Apocryphal Acts offered accounts of Apostolic feats and gave accounts of the deaths of the Apostles (events not recorded in the Bible). Such often exaggerated facts and the exaggerations were accepted as Truth.
 - iii. Apocryphal Epistles were pseudonymous works that arose from many locations.
- b) Notice some of the teachings contained in these writings.
 - i. Much material was fantasy and could not be accepted as revealed Truth.
 - ii. The material attempted to “fill in” the gaps of Scripture (such as the childhood of Jesus; Paul’s vision of the third heaven; etc.).
 - iii. Some writing actually sought to propagate heresy.
- c) The title “The Lost Books of the Bible” is sometimes applied to these books. This is a sensational and misleading title because the books were never a part of the Bible!

6. 📖 Summary thoughts regarding the New Testament Canon.

- a. 📖 We should feel total confidence in the integrity of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament!

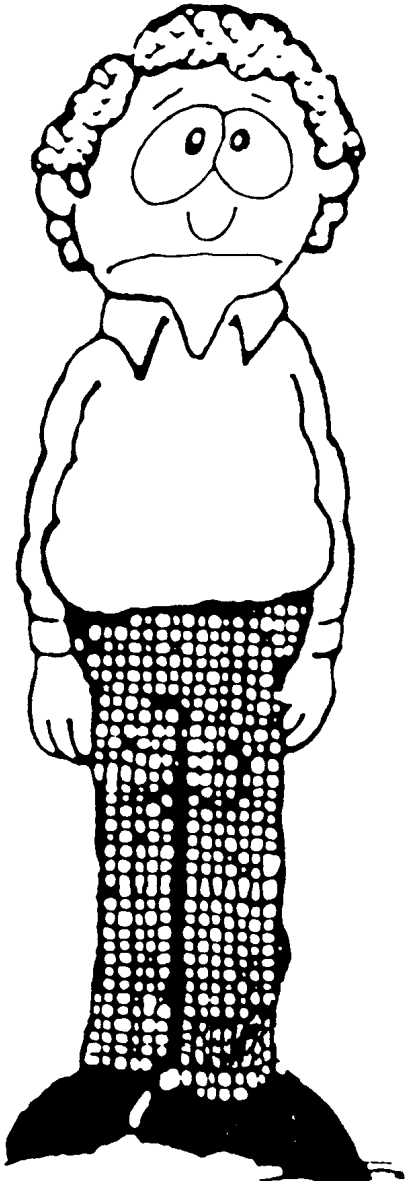
“No Christian, confident in the providential working of his God and informed about the true nature of canonicity of His Word, should be disturbed about the dependability of the Bible we now possess” (Comfort, ed., 77, 78).

“God’s divine providence has provided ample internal and external evidences to prove that the 66 books of our Bible are inspired by him. If we will to do his will, he will help us to know his teaching” (*The Holy Scriptures*, Ft. Worth Lectures, 119).

- b. 📖 We should feel compelled to obey fully the commands discovered within these twenty-seven books of the New Testament!

“The subject of the Canon...the question can never be solved beyond question or debate. There were those who rejected Moses and the prophets. The Jews as a whole rejected Christ and only a few who heard the apostles believed them. God’s final authority beyond question will not be exercised until the judgment day when every

knee shall bow and every tongue confess" (*The Holy Scriptures*, Ft. Worth Lectures, 119).



**"Can I really
believe
The New Testament
is genuine?"**

Transparency 8/1



**CONSTRUCTING
THE
NEW TESTAMENT
LIBRARY!**

**The Guiding Principle –
Inspiration! (John 14:26)**

**The Provisions of Revelation –
Writings! (2 Peter 3:15)**

The Collection Achieved –

27 Books!

Transparency 8/2

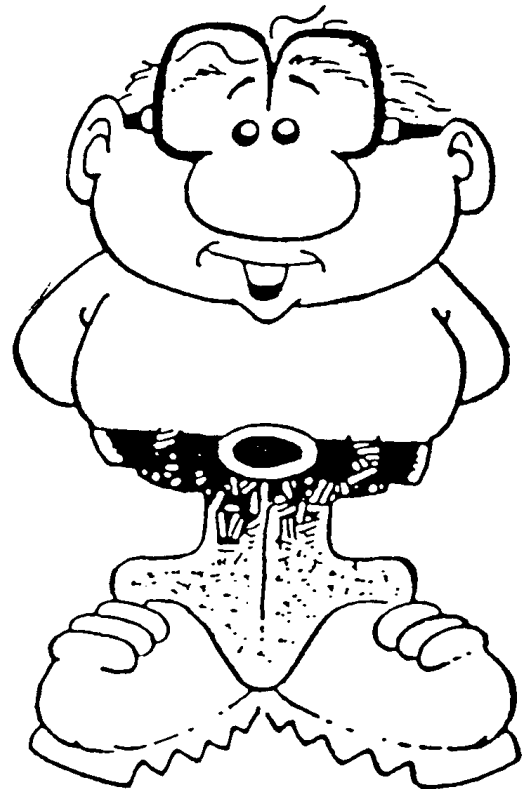
THE TESTS OF CANON

Apostolicity

Intrinsic Worth

Consistency

Universality



Transparency 8/3

THE FINAL RECOGNITION OF GOD'S "COMPLETE" REVELATION!

**Some were "instantly"
accepted!**

**A defined list was
needed because of
heresy!**



**In later years some tried to
"add" to the inspired collection
some uninspired writings!**

**Be confident! The New
Testament Canon is historically
secure!**

Transparency 8/4

**WHAT ABOUT
THE DISPUTED
WRITINGS?**



**Those that were questioned were
added to the Canon!
(Hebrews, Revelation, James,
2 Peter,
2, 3 John, Jude)**

**Those recognized as spurious
were excluded from the Canon!**

(Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, Apocalypse)

Transparency 8/5

SUMMARY THOUGHTS THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Be totally confident!

Be compelled to obey!



Transparency 8/6