

The Canon of the New Testament

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THE BIBLE

Main Themes

The Bible has been described as "God's own witness to himself in the form of human witness concerning his work, will, and ways, and how mankind should worship him."¹ Broadly speaking, the Bible addresses two main topics: the nature of God, and the nature of people. The constant interaction between God and humanity forms the backdrop to the Bible's central themes, which include: "God, human nature, creation, providence, good and evil, salvation, [and] eschatology."²

Regarding people, the Bible affirms that: we are significant; we have a responsibility to be rightly related to both God and other people (= society); we possess both a physical and a moral/spiritual nature; and we are able to make real and lasting moral and spiritual choices.³ Regarding God, the Bible reveals who God is and what he is like through both his works and his words which, broadly speaking, point toward God's creating and providing, redeeming/saving, and judging.⁴

God's Authority

"Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises."⁵

"Authority" refers to "power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior."⁶ As the author (= originator or creator) of our world, God has ultimate authority over it and us. We know of God and his plans and pur-

¹ J. I. Packer, "Scripture." in *New Dictionary of Theology*, S. B. Ferguson et al, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

² L. Ryken et al, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), s.v. "Bible." Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ N. M. Cameron, "Bible, Authority of the," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, W. A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). (Now: *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*. W. A. Elwell, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.) Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

⁶ Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary. 2003. Merriam-Webster, Inc. Version 3.0. Electronic edition.

poses for us only because he has stooped to reveal himself in ways we can understand. Most notably God speaks to us through the pages of the Bible. As his inspired Word, "Scripture expresses and mediates the authority of God," affirming both that God has the right to be heard and obeyed, and that we are obligated to live by his "declarations and directives."⁷

In a very real sense, "[t]he central question that runs through the Bible is that of the authority of God."⁸ God's authority is demonstrated in the Bible's very first words, "In the beginning God," and the eight personal pronouncements that quickly follow ("Then God said" in Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29). Almost immediately, however, we witness a challenge to God's authority, first in the form of the serpent's question, "Indeed, has God said ...?", and then by the rebellion of the first human pair, Adam and Eve. We see God's authority continuing to be declared and denied, upheld and challenged, down through the centuries until we arrive at the Bible's last book. In the book of Revelation the curtain is drawn back and we are shown the final destiny of all of God's enemies. In the meantime, we await the return of the Lord Jesus, the one who with God's supreme authority will come again to punish those who have lived a life of rebellion against God, and reward those who have sought after a life of submission and obedience.⁹

While it is certainly true that "the Bible carries authority for a person's life because of the authority of its human authors as spokespersons of God and because of the authority of the ultimate author, God himself,"¹⁰ it must be remembered that there exists an indispensable link between correct interpretation of the Bible and the Bible's rightful exercise of its inherent authority. This fact helps to explain, for example, how liberal scholars who despite being intimately familiar with the words of Scripture nonetheless seriously misinterpret the Bible, in the end feeling no obligation to believe or obey its clear and direct teachings. On the other end of the spectrum we find the equally dubious approach of the What-this-passage-means-to-me-is method of Bible study often adopted by well-meaning but less than well-informed believers. These Christians fail to realize that, the ever-growing array of study Bibles notwithstanding, there is no shortcut for knowing and applying biblical teaching. However, if and when we regularly, consistently approach the Bible with a humble and prayerful attitude, petitioning God for wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, the

⁷ J. I. Packer, "Scripture."

⁸ N. M. Cameron, "Bible, Authority of the."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ L. Ryken et al, eds., "Bible."

end result is sure to be a life lived under the Bible's authority that is both theologically sound and spiritually fruitful.^{11*}

THE CANON

The word "canon" is derived from the Greek *kanon*, which originally referred to "a rod, ruler, staff, or measuring rod," and later was used figuratively of a "standard" or "norm."¹² As applied to the books of the Christian Bible, "canon" refers to the "authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture."¹³ These books -- and only these books -- are held to be inspired by God and thus "normative for faith and practice."¹⁴

Like a number of important theological concepts, the word "canon" is not to be found within the Bible itself. While a universally binding list of New Testament (NT) books did not come into existence until the middle of the fourth century, the criteria associated with canonicity was used immediately regarding the newly produced writings designed to guide and direct the Christian community, as well as later in deciding which writings could and could not be accepted as genuine. Like their Old Testament (OT) counterpart, the writings that comprise our NT were held to be sacred, authoritative, and prophetic.¹⁵

Jesus Christ is the key to the canonization of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. Jesus represents the ultimate fulfillment of the OT or, as one Bible scholar of renown has put it: "Jesus and the message of life proclaimed in his name were found [by his followers] to be the sum and substance of the OT revelation."¹⁶ Moreover, Jesus' frequent use of OT Scripture during the course of his earthly ministry served to confirm the truth and validity of the OT. As for the NT, Jesus himself is the chief reason it was written, and prior to his departure Jesus promised his followers they would be guided into all truth (to include their penning of the NT).¹⁷ ¹⁸ "The whole work of the apostles was in interpreting [Jesus] to the growing church. His

¹¹ J. I. Packer, "Scripture." * NOTE: For a list of recommended Bible study resources, see: <http://AC21DOJ.org/BibleStudyResources/Resources.html>

¹² N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

¹³ *Merriam-Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary*.

¹⁴ J. N. Birdsall, "Canon of the New Testament," in *New Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas et al, eds., 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

¹⁵ N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*.

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, "Canon," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. B. Green et al, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

¹⁷ N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*.

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, "Canon."

sayings and His life were in part for the illumination of the Old Testament; wholly for the understanding of life and its issues. In every assembly of Christians from the earliest days He was taught as well as the Old Testament."¹⁹

Because both the OT and the NT were written via the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, they possess his authority. This is a crucial point, since it means that God *determined* the canon, while man merely *recognizes* it.²⁰ This is in contrast to the popular but mistaken notion that the Church gave us the NT canon. As J. I. Packer has put it: "The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by His work of creation, and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up."²¹

The following chart helps to highlight the fact that the Church is under the canon and not over it.²²

The Incorrect View	The Correct View
The Church Is Determiner of Canon The Church Is Mother of Canon The Church Is Magistrate of Canon The Church Is Regulator of Canon The Church Is Judge of Canon The Church Is Master of Canon	The Church Is Discoverer of Canon The Church Is Child of Canon The Church Is Minister of Canon The Church Is Recognizer of Canon The Church Is Witness of Canon The Church Is Servant of Canon

APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY

"The determining factor in New Testament canonization was inspiration, and the primary test was apostolicity."²³ In essence the canon of the New Testament is nothing more than a recognition of those writings that ultimately come from God and thus possess his authority. "Authority is the right to effect control over objects, individuals or events. While human authority may be delegated, God's authority arises from himself alone. Power, meanwhile, is the ability to bring about what one desires. In the Gospels God reveals his authority and power in the person of Jesus."²⁴

¹⁹ J. Orr, gen. ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. (1915), s.v. "Canon of the New Testament." Electronic edition as found in the e-Sword software program for Windows.

²⁰ N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ G. S. Shogren, "Authority and Power," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. B. Green et al, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

As God incarnate, Jesus could rightly declare: "All authority (Greek *exousia*) has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). It was immediately after making this statement that Jesus commissioned his apostles to take the Gospel into all the world. Jesus' authority was/is foundational to his commission, and as those taken into Jesus' service and then sent out on his behalf, the apostles shared his authority.²⁵ It is the history of the carrying out of that commission, including the exact content of the apostle's Spirit-inspired teachings, that is preserved within our NT.

There is a natural and necessary link between the apostles' authoritative teachings and the canon. A book could be accepted into the NT canon only if it: was authored or authenticated by an apostle; contained Christ-honoring doctrine fully in line with other teachings known to be genuinely apostolic (including the "rule of faith"); and was acknowledged by and used of the Christian Church from the apostolic age forward, with the end result that spiritual fruit was produced in the lives of believers.²⁶ "In the final analysis, it was the historical verification of apostolic authorship or influence and the universal consciousness of the church, guided by the Holy Spirit, that resulted in the final decision concerning what books should be considered canonical and worthy of inclusion in what we know as the New Testament."²⁷

As Christ's personally chosen ambassadors, the apostles were fully aware of their all-important role in helping to grow and mature the Christian community brought into existence by God's Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. As "authentic spokesmen for God,"²⁸ all the apostles spoke and wrote with God-given authority. "Apostleship is associated with founding churches and conveys authority over them in terms of imposing discipline and also in terms of receiving and transmitting authoritative revelation, so that apostles, along with prophets, form the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20; cf. 1 Cor. 12:28–29; 2 Pet. 3:2)."²⁹

²⁵ C. Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), s.v. "apostello." Electronic edition as found in the Zondervan Reference Software program for Windows, ver. 2.8.

²⁶ J. I. Packer, "Scripture."

²⁷ E. E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pg. 115.

²⁸ W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds., *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2001), s.v. "Bible, Canon of the." Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

²⁹ I. H. Marshall, "Apostle," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, S. B. Ferguson et al, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows

Here it is good to remind ourselves of the fact that

When used of the apostolate, the term [authority/*exousia*] carries the sense of faithful transmission and hence guarantor rather than innovator of church tradition. ... Apostolic authority was not innovative authority. It resided in a common core of traditions about the life and teaching of Jesus, carefully preserved and transmitted by the early church. The apostolic task was that of faithful transmission of these traditions to new congregations, rather than origination (1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thess 2:15). The transmission process was both oral and written (2 Thess 2:15).³⁰

As the author of most of the NT and the "apostle to the Gentiles," Paul remains the prime example of apostolic authority. Paul "taught and commanded in Christ's name (2 Thes. 3:6), claim[ed] Christ's authority because he was Christ's apostle (1 Cor. 14:37) and maintain[ed] that both his matter and his words were Spirit-given (1 Cor. 2:9–13)."³¹ Practically speaking, what proof could Paul offer that he was indeed an apostle? The question is more than academic for at least two reasons: 1) "God's people needed to be critical rather than gullible, for there were already many false apostles in the first century. Not all that was supernatural was of God."³² 2) Paul's apostleship was routinely challenged by those peddling a false gospel (see especially Acts, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and Galatians). "When his authority [was] challenged, Paul point[ed] to the validating marks that he share[d] with other apostles," in particular: bearing personal witness to Christ's resurrection; the right to financial support (which he waived); the "signs of the apostles," that is, "signs, wonders, and miracles"; and preaching that was of "power and the Spirit."³³ On a more personal level, Paul pointed to the churches he established; his faithful presentation of the Gospel; and the many hardships he endured as a missionary.³⁴

The Bible is content to emphasize the fact that the apostles' Christ-given "apostolic commission authorized them to preach (1 Cor. 1:17); to be ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20); to be witnesses to all nations (Luke 24:48); and to make disciples of all peoples (Matt. 28:19)."³⁵

³⁰ L. L. Belleville, "Authority," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne et al, eds. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

³¹ J. I. Packer, "Scripture."

³² G. R. Lewis and B. A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 1:115.

³³ L. L. Belleville, "Authority."

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ R. D. Rightmire, "Apostle," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, W. A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). (Now: W. A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological*

The apostles were held in high esteem by the early Church not because they themselves were more than ordinary men but, rather, because they had been authorized by Jesus himself to fulfill a particular function or task³⁶ -- namely, bearing witness to the extraordinary truth that God is at work in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

With the exception of Jesus, the NT consistently emphasizes the message over the messenger. Hence it is "[t]he deposit of revelation transmitted by the apostles and preserved in its written form in the New Testament" that remains of utmost importance be it for the Church of the first century or the Church of the twenty-first century, forming as it does the basis for the Church's preaching and teaching.³⁷ "Like the messages of Christ, the apostle's messages originated with God the Father, came through human concepts and words, were supernaturally kept from error by the power of the Holy Spirit, taught only truth authoritatively and effectually, and were not time-bound, but classically time-related and relevant."³⁸

THE CHURCH AND THE CANON

Holy Scripture has been central to the life and history of the Christian Church from the first century until the present day. From the great ecumenical councils that forever affirmed foundational doctrines, to the grief-stricken Christian desperate for comfort and guidance, from the preacher defiantly demanding reform to the prisoner dying in body but soaring in spirit -- in these and a myriad of similar situations, it has been "through Scripture that God has ruled the mind and heart of the church and the Christian."³⁹

The OT canon was already in place when the Church was founded.⁴⁰ Within the Jewish Scriptures (our OT), the Law (Genesis - Deuteronomy) was of primary importance, with the remainder (the Prophets and the Writings) "function[ing] largely as a record of [the nation of Israel's] response to the Law."⁴¹ The general attitude of the first Christian's toward the OT was the same as that of Jesus: far from being considered inferior or obsolete, the OT was held in highest esteem, with many (most?) of its promises and prophecies understood as reaching their fulfillment with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Christian Church. In like

Dictionary of the Bible [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000].) Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

³⁶ C. Brown, ed., "apostello."

³⁷ R. D. Rightmire, "Apostle."

³⁸ G. R. Lewis and B. A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:115-16.

³⁹ N. M. Cameron, "Bible, Authority of the."

⁴⁰ N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*.

⁴¹ W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds., "Bible, Canon of the."

manner, the "new" Christian covenant was seen as a continuation of the previous or "old" Jewish covenant; it was "new in the sense of fresh, not in the sense of different."⁴² It is also worth noting that while the canonization process for the OT was much longer than its NT counterpart, "[h]istorically, Jewish scholars have considered the canon closed since the time of Malachi, and have not included the Apocrypha, which was written in subsequent times."⁴³

The canon of the NT refers to those books that were universally accepted as authoritative for the Church. The apostles and their associates wrote other letters, with some of these finding mention within the NT (e.g., 1 Corinthians 5:9; Colossians 4:16; cf. Luke 1:1). Some writings were accepted within a limited geographical region of the empire, such as by "a particular city and its immediate surroundings,"⁴⁴ examples here including Hermas, Barnabas, and 1 and 2 Clement. Other writings were seen as beneficial for private devotion but not suitable for public worship. And of course some writings were universally rejected as heretical. In view of the abundance of religious literature produced by/within the early Church, the number of NT books is actually quite small.⁴⁵

The writings found within our NT circulated among the early churches, with collections being made beginning very early. And so, for example, 2 Peter 3:16 refers to Paul's "letters" (plural), clearly indicating a collection. Churches desired to have as many authentic apostolic writings as possible, and church leaders relied on these writings for worship, instruction, and defense against false teaching.⁴⁶

By the time of the first church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340), books were seen as falling into one of four categories: "(1) *accepted* (most of our twenty-seven), (2) *disputed* (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John), (3) *rejected* (various apocryphal New Testament books), and (4) *heretical* (primarily pseudepigraphical books). [Eusebius] has Revelation in both the accepted and rejected categories, saying opinion on it at the time was divided."⁴⁷ Here it is important to note that while there was ongoing discussion regarding the "disputed" books, none of our NT books were considered "rejected" or "heretical." The fact that the "disputed"

⁴² J. McRay, "Bible, Canon of the," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, W. A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). (Now: W. A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.) Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ E. E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 73.

⁴⁶ W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds., "Bible, Canon of the."

⁴⁷ J. McRay, "Bible, Canon of the."

books took longer to accept attests to the care with which their apostolic origin was investigated and confirmed.⁴⁸

HISTORY OF THE CANON

Of the many ways to examine the process of canonization, here we will view developments through a system of time periods covering the first four centuries A.D., keeping in mind the fact that there is much overlap between periods. It should also be noted that any system is somewhat arbitrary, as the recognition and acceptance of the NT Scriptures continued unabated until the official closing of the canon. As one source puts it: "The canon is the collection of 27 books which the church (generally) receives as its New Testament Scriptures. The history of the canon is the history of the process by which these books were brought together and their value as sacred Scriptures officially recognized. That process was gradual, furthered by definite needs, and ... unquestionably continuous ..."⁴⁹

Specifically, we will be looking at four time periods:

- 1st century - NT books are written; they are copied and distributed to various churches; they are being grouped together
- 2nd century - NT books are cited as authoritative; they are translated into other languages; commentaries begin to appear
- 3rd century - books are collected to form the NT, in contrast to other Christian writings
- 4th century - Church Fathers attest to the Church's acceptance of the NT books; the canon is closed⁵⁰

First Century (A.D. 1-100)

Prior to a fixed canon of writings, there was another type of canon or "rule of faith" by which church leaders were able to discern true teaching from false. Far from conflicting with the authentic writings (our NT books) which followed it, the rule of faith -- "the essence of the church's teaching voice" -- was permanently preserved in them. Lest, as some have claimed, the rule of faith represents some sort of secret, hidden knowledge, we should take note of its public character:

Within churches of demonstrable apostolic foundation or close association, the rule of faith stands for the unbroken continuity of public (not secret or esoteric) teaching from the time of the apostles onward (not latter-day novelties), carried by a historically recognizable succession of teachers (presbyters or bishops) and by an openly transmitted corpus of apostolic writings (a canon larger

⁴⁸ W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds., "Bible, Canon of the."

⁴⁹ J. Orr, gen. ed., "Canon of the New Testament."

⁵⁰ W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds., "Bible, Canon of the."

than Marcion's but exclusive of many gnostic gospels, etc.). As such the appeal to the rule of faith had validity for only a limited period of living memory.⁵¹

The need for a written record of Jesus' life and ministry would not have been acute while eyewitnesses were still alive. As the first generation of Christians began to pass from the scene, however, "the first Gospel writings began to appear and soon circulated among the churches."⁵² While at first a given gospel would have been limited to a particular region in keeping with its intended audience, "by quite early in the second century, the fourfold Gospel began to circulate among the churches in place of a single Gospel writing."⁵³ At the same time, Paul's letters were also being circulated as a collection. It was the book of Acts that eventually precipitated the joining of the two collections into something very much like our NT.⁵⁴ The shift from the scroll to the codex (book-form) helped to facilitate the grouping together and distribution of the NT books.⁵⁵

All of our NT books were written by the close of the first century A.D., and most were written decades earlier, very close in time to the events they record. It is only logical to assume that any given book would have been copied and distributed to various other Christian communities. Specific examples that a NT book was intended for more than one church include:

- Galatians (1:2 - for "the churches of Galatia")
- Ephesians (likely "a general or circular letter for the churches in Asia"⁵⁶)
- Colossians (4:16 - also for "the church of the Laodiceans")
- 1 Peter (1:1 - "To those ... scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia ...")
- Revelation (1:4 - to "the seven churches in the province of Asia").

At first the Christian faith was seen as a sect of Judaism and afforded the same legal protections by the Roman government. The situation took a dire turn for the worse, however, when in July 64 the city of Rome was set afire. "The public feeling of resentment broke out against the emperor

⁵¹ D. F. Wright, "Creeds, Confessional Forms," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

⁵² F. F. Bruce, "Canon."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ A. G. Patzia, "Canon," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne et al, eds. (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows

⁵⁶ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (1930?). Electronic edition as found in the e-Sword software program for Windows.

[Nero] to such a degree that, to avoid the stigma, just or unjust, of being himself guilty of setting the city on fire, he made the Christians the scape-goats which he thought he needed.⁵⁷ Christians were subjected to some of the most horrid treatment imaginable, including being covered with animal skins and fed to wild dogs, nailed to crosses, and burned at night to serve as human torches.⁵⁸ It is believed that our NT books of 2 Timothy, 1 Peter, and Revelation may very well reflect the situation of persecution under Nero.⁵⁹ Apparently the persecution was limited to the area in and around Rome, and it was at this time that the apostles Paul and Peter were put to death. Other periods of persecution followed, mostly localized and sporadic, until that imposed by Emperor Decius (see below).

Beginning with the situation immediately following the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1), persecution served to purify the Church and spread the Christian faith as believers were both forced out of the urban centers and into other language groups. As the African Latin theologian and moralist Tertullian (c. 160-225) was to observe: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."⁶⁰ This, of course, had implications for the NT canon as the Scriptures were taken into new geographical regions and translated into new languages.

Second Century (A.D. 100-200)

The leaders within the Church following the apostles -- the "Church Fathers" -- are an invaluable source for understanding the history of the NT canon. Taken together, their writings include quotes from, paraphrases of, and allusions to, every one of our 27 NT books. The main concern of the first generation following the apostles was to edify the Church, and their writings reflect extensive use of typological interpretation. Known as the first Christian apologists, the Fathers of the second century are remembered for their efforts at explaining and defending the Christian faith. The third century Fathers were more polemical, as they had the unpleasant task of refuting error in their fight against false doctrine. By the fourth century we move into the "golden age of scientific Bible study," and the exposition of the Scriptures stands out as the greatest contribution made by the Fathers of that time.⁶¹

From the end of the first century we have: Clement (died c. 100), bishop of Rome, whose letter to the church at Corinth "is the earliest Christian

⁵⁷ J. Orr, gen. ed., "Persecution."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ J. D. Douglas et al, eds., *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1992).

Electronic edition as found in the QuickVerse software program for Windows.

⁶¹ E. E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 74.

writing apart from the books of the New Testament."⁶² Outstanding Church Fathers from the second century include:

- Ignatius (died c. 107), bishop of Antioch in Syria, who was "killed by beasts in the imperial games" in Rome⁶³
- Clement of Alexandria (c. 155-c. 220), the "first Christian writer to show extensive knowledge of pagan and Christian writings"⁶⁴
- Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), Christian writer and martyr
- Irenaeus (c. 130-195), bishop of Lyons in southern France
- Polycarp (c. 70-156), bishop of Smyrna and disciple of the apostle John, who was burned at the stake

At this early date in Church history there were differences of opinion regarding the status of some non-canonical books, as well as a few of our NT books not yet universally accepted. However, every book that was accepted was held by the Church Fathers to be authoritative and far superior to any other writings produced within the Church. Thus Jesus' words were considered of absolute importance, more so even than the OT Scriptures; the apostles shared in Jesus' authority; the apostles were parallel to the OT prophets; and the apostles' authority exceeded that of the Church Fathers themselves.⁶⁵

It was in the second half of the second century that the concept of a NT canon clearly emerged. By A.D. 170 the first harmony of the gospels was produced (the *Diatessaron*, by Tatian); the Muratorian Canon (arguably) included almost all the books of our NT; and translated versions attested to the universal presence, if not acceptance, of every NT book.⁶⁶

This time period also marked the beginning of serious challenges to orthodoxy in the forms of heresy and extensive persecution, both of which actually proved highly instrumental in the establishment of the NT canon. The chief example of heresy at this time is found in the false teaching of Marcion of Sinope (c. 100–c. 165). Breaking with the church in Rome about A.D. 150, he rejected all things Jewish, including the entire OT and much of the NT, and established what amounted to a counterfeit Church whose influence persisted for two centuries. "The heretic Marcion, by defining a limited canon of his own (c. 140), in effect hastened the day when the orthodox believers needed to declare themselves on this issue."⁶⁷

⁶² Ibid, 75.

⁶³ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁴ J. D. Douglas et al, eds., *Who's Who in Christian History*.

⁶⁵ D. A. Hagner, "Apostolic Fathers," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

⁶⁶ W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds., "Bible, Canon of the."

⁶⁷ Ibid.

There was also a heretical charismatic movement known as Montanism, which proved to be especially influential. Montanists emphasized "the Paraclete's continuing gift of prophecy, severe asceticism, a gradual restriction of the term church to a charismatic group of 'spiritual' persons, and vibrant millennialism."⁶⁸

Besides Marcionism and Montanism, "Gnosticism was also compelling attention to the matter of the writings of the apostles. From the beginning Gnostic teachers claimed that Jesus had favored chosen ones of His apostles with a body of esoteric truth which had been handed down by secret tradition. This the church denied, and in the controversy that went on through years the question of what were authoritative writings became more and more pronounced."⁶⁹ In particular, various Gnostic "gospels" of the 2nd century attempted to graft non-canonical (= false) writings onto genuine NT Scripture. This practice actually amounted to inadvertent testimony that there were both certain documents that were widely known and accepted as being of apostolic origin AND other writings that could not be validated as such despite their claim to be based on secret knowledge/tradition and/or new/continuing revelation.⁷⁰

In answer to these challenges, Christian "writers often referred to or cited the NT writings (especially Matthew and the letters of Paul)."⁷¹

Third Century (A.D. 200-300)

Church Fathers from this time period include:

- Cyprian (c. 200–258), bishop of Carthage (North Africa), highly influential in the West
- Dionysius (c. 190–c. 264), bishop of Alexandria and pupil of Origen
- Origen (c. 185–c. 254), renowned Alexandrian theologian
- Tertullian (c. 160–225), African Latin theologian and apologist
- Gregory Thaumaturgus (c. 213–c. 270), bishop of Neocaesarea in Pontus

Origen is widely regarded as the most influential Church Father of his time. "His fame rests upon his ability as an exegete, though he worked laboriously and successfully in other fields. His testimony is of high value, not simply because of his own studies, but also because of his wide knowledge of what was thought in other Christian centers in the world of his time."⁷² "A prodigious scholar and interpreter, he made critical studies

⁶⁸ J. D. Douglas et al, eds., *Who's Who in Christian History*.

⁶⁹ J. Orr, gen. ed., "Canon of the New Testament."

⁷⁰ J. N. Birdsall, "Canon of the New Testament."

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² J. Orr, gen. ed., "Canon of the New Testament."

of the NT text (alongside his work on the *Hexapla*) and wrote commentaries and homilies on most of the books of the NT, emphasizing their inspiration by God."⁷³

"Before 250 persecution was mainly local, sporadic, and more often the result of mob action than the result of definite civil policy. After that date, however, persecution became at times the studied policy of the Roman imperial government and, hence, widespread and violent."⁷⁴ It was in his misplaced zeal to restore the Roman religion that Emperor Decius (c. 201-251) instituted what was to be a brief but severe persecution of Christians, including forced pagan sacrifices and the destruction of biblical manuscripts. During this time the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Jerusalem were all killed. The persecution ended when Decius himself was killed in a battle against the Goths.^{75 76}

Fourth Century (A.D. 300-400)

Church Fathers from this time period include:

- Hilary (c. 315–367), bishop of Poitiers
- Cyril (c. 310–386), bishop of Jerusalem
- Gregory (330–c. 395), bishop of Nyssa
- Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330–389), Cappadocian monk
- Basil of Caesarea (c. 330–379), aka Basil the Great
- John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), renowned expositor
- Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340), dubbed the "father of church history"
- Jerome (c. 345–c. 419), Latin Bible translator
- Epiphanius (c. 315–403), metropolitan bishop of Salamis
- Athanasius (c. 295–373), bishop of Alexandria (Egypt)
- Augustine of Hippo (354-430), considered the greatest of the Latin Fathers

It is Emperor Diocletian (245-313) who has the dubious distinction of implementing "the most severe persecution that the Christians ever endured."⁷⁷ Beginning in 303, horrendous measures were taken against Christians, including the destruction of churches and the burning of Christian books; the imprisonment, torture, and execution of clergy; and forced sacrifice to pagan gods.⁷⁸ "When the persecution began, churches had to

⁷³ W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds., "Bible, Canon of the."

⁷⁴ E. E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 86.

⁷⁵ J. D. Douglas et al, eds., *Who's Who in Christian History*.

⁷⁶ N. L. Geisler and W. E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*.

⁷⁷ E. E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 92.

⁷⁸ G. T. Kurian, ed., *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001). (Now: G. T. Kurian, ed., *Nelson's Dictionary of Christianity: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World*

decide, if they had not done so already, which books were sacred to them and which could be handed over to the authorities. They tried to preserve the sacred Scriptures often by handing over to the authorities only the writings of lesser importance."⁷⁹ This, of course, had major implications for the canon of the NT. When, following the end of the persecution, Emperor Constantine commissioned Eusebius to produce fifty copies of the Bible, the noted church historian knew which books were considered sacred and which were not.^{80 81} "The task which the emperor gave to Eusebius to prepare 'fifty copies of the Divine Scriptures' established a standard which in time gave recognition to all doubtful books. In the West, Jerome and Augustine were the controlling factors in its settlement of the canon. The publication of the Vulgate (Jerome's *Latin Bible*, 390-405 AD) virtually determined the matter."⁸²

By early in the fourth century all of our NT books were accepted by a majority of the Church, although a few books were still disputed by some. The earliest known document to have listed all of our 27 NT books without exception or qualification is the Easter letter of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in 367. "These are the wells of salvation," he wrote, "so that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the sayings in these. Let no one add to these. Let nothing be taken away."⁸³

"The Council of Hippo (393) was probably the first church council to lay down the limits of the canon of scripture," its list reflecting our 27 NT books.⁸⁴ And it was the Council of Carthage, in 397, which gave its official stamp of recognition regarding the 27 books, effectively closing or sealing the NT canon in the East. In the West, with the list of 27 NT books incorporated into the Latin Vulgate (commissioned by Pope Damasus in 382) "the dimensions of the New Testament canon were fixed."⁸⁵

CONCLUSION

Saint Ambrose (c. 340-397) noted: "As in paradise, God walks in the Holy Scriptures, seeking man."⁸⁶ And it was A. W. Tozer (1897-1963) who

[Nashville: Thomas Nelson], 2005.) Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

⁷⁹ J. N. Birdsall, "Canon of the New Testament."

⁸⁰ W. A. Elwell and P. W. Comfort, eds., "Bible, Canon of the."

⁸¹ J. N. Birdsall, "Canon of the New Testament."

⁸² J. Orr, gen. ed., "Canon of the New Testament."

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ E. Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992). Electronic edition as found in the Libronix software program for Windows.

said: "A new world will arise out of the religious mists when we approach our Bible with the idea that it is ... a book which is now speaking."⁸⁷

While many of the details regarding the history of the NT canon remain shrouded in the mists of antiquity, what we do know attests to God's love and care in providing us with his Word to guide and sustain us. As we read and study the Bible, may we experience ever anew the greatest joy possible now and forever -- the joy of knowing, loving, and serving our great and awesome God.

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