



# THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

## *Study Notes*

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## **The New Testament Canon**

Why spend time studying how the New Testament Canon came about? There are a number of reasons. First, there is a great deal of confusion within the Christian church as to what is authoritative in their life and what authority really means to how they live that life. There are people around us who will argue that the Bible no longer has any authority in modern times. There are also some that would bring forth all kinds of ancient documents and suggest that since these also come from the early church, they must also be authoritative.

There is the Jewish Apocrypha, for example, which is not part of the New Testament, and not considered Canon by the protestant church, but acts as a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. Thus, some people want to imply its Canonicity. Many people also are not sure as to how we should handle these and other non-Canonical books. Are they heresy? Should we study them? Can they be used in the Christian life?

A second reason that it is important to study the New Testament Canon is that it shapes how you approach the Bible in your studies. There are many who will say that the Bible is a human document and that there are errors within it. There are some that would even say that it is incomplete and other old documents should be added to it or at least used to understand it.

Christians are a people whose lives are defined by the Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments. While the New Testament is a uniquely Christian document, it is impossible to understand the New Testament apart from the Old Testament. Jesus, in particular, constantly quoted the Old Testament in his teachings and that pattern is reflected in all of the Canonical writings. Remember, all of the New Testament writers except Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, were Jewish Christians and not gentile converts. The Jewish customs and scripture seeped out of these men's pores like the sweat of an athlete. It cannot be denied or ignored.

John Wesley described himself as a "Man of one book." While he was well read, he considered the Bible to be the supreme authority in the life of a Christian. Martin Luther, at the Diet of Worms in 1521, said when he was facing heresy trials, risking the loss of his life, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

John Calvin, in his Institutes, states: "For by his Word, God rendered faith unambiguous forever, a faith that should be superior to all opinion. Finally, in order that truth might abide forever in the world with a continuing succession of teaching and survive through all ages, the same oracles He had given to the patriarchs it was his pleasure to have recorded, as it were, on public tablets."<sup>1</sup>

The reality is, if you claim to be a Christian and thus part of the Christian church, then your life, your faith, and your tradition must be grounded in scripture. In fact, without claiming scripture as an authority in your life, you cannot claim Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin's Institutes, I.VI.2.

And how is it that you can walk with confidence in your faith if you cannot stand with confidence on your scriptures?

Closer to home, we who are members of the Presbyterian Church in America hold to the authority, plenary inspiration, and inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures as part of our foundational documents. We affirm in our Book of Church Order that, “The Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice.” If we are to stand in good faith as members of this denomination, we must come to terms with the means that God used through history to deliver this document to us.

### **The Historic Confessions**

The historic confessions of faith have strongly held to the authority of the Bible as divinely inspired and they have held also that the scriptures are complete. Following is a brief overview of the confessional views toward the scriptures.

#### ***Luther’s Shorter Catechism of 1559***

“3. How Does God make Himself known to us? God Makes Himself known to us partly through His works, mainly through His word.”

“4. What is the word of God? The Bible is the word of God.”

“5. Through whom did God give the Bible? The Old Testament was given through the prophets, and the New Testament, through the evangelists and apostles.”

“6. How is their word the word of God? Their word is the word of God because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit.”

“7. What is meant by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is meant that the writers of the Bible wrote as they were moved and guided by the Holy Spirit.”

#### ***Belgic Confession of 1561 (Article 3)***

“We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of man, but that holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, as the apostle Peter saith. And that afterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing; and He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.

Article four of the Belgic Confession goes on to affirm the 66 books of the Bible as the only books that are considered to be Canonical.

#### ***The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 (Section I)***

“1. We believe and confess the Canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God Himself spake to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.”

***London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1644***

“VII. The Rule of this Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience, concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not man's inventions, opinions, devices, laws, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but only the word of God contained in the Canonical Scriptures

VIII. In this written Word God hath plainly revealed whatsoever he hath thought needful for us to know, believe, and acknowledge, touching the Nature and Office of Christ, in whom all the promises are Yea and Amen to the praise of God.”

***The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 (Chapter 1)***

“II. Under the name of holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained in all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these: ...”

-a list of the 66 books of the Bible follows.

“VI. The whole council of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequences may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. “

***Confession of Faith of the Calvinist Methodists of 1823 (Section 2)***

All the Scriptures - that is to say, the books of the Old and New Testaments - are the word of God. From him they came; they were spoken by holy men of God; they contain a full, sufficient, and perfect revelation of the mind and will of God, concerning all things that are necessary to be known for our salvation; and they are the only infallible rule of faith and obedience. The truths which they contain respecting God and the perfections of his nature are so exceedingly broad and deep, that no one could have revealed them, except him who has a perfect knowledge of himself; the godliness and self denial of the writers, the purity and holiness of all the truths contained in the Scriptures, the consistency of all the parts, though written by various persons and in various ages of the world, the continued preservation of the Scriptures, though the strongest authorities on earth have assailed and sought to destroy them, the fact that it is their main design to manifest God's greatness and glory, their authority and influence over the hearts and lives of men, and the superiority of those nations which have had the Scriptures, in every age of the world, over other nations, in morals, knowledge, and all else that adorns humanity, - all these things prove beyond a doubt that the infinite God is their author.

While the historic confessions are fairly uniform in their elevation of scriptural authority, modern confessions have been divided. The evangelical church holds to classic confessional standards with a high view of scripture, but even within evangelical circles, there is erosion on the bulwarks. Modernity has elevated reason as the prime authority and places scripture as secondary. The Neo-Orthodox movement placed its emphasis on how we experience scripture rather than what it actually says. And the Post-Modern movement has rejected outright the possibility that there can be any absolute truth or authority.

This is the world that we live in and these are the influences that we face. If we are going to hold to our Christian roots, which we must, we must hold scripture high.

When you begin to allow for the possibility that the Bible might not “really” be the authoritative word of God from start to finish, then you open wide the door to relativism, where everybody is allowed to pick and choose what they want to believe and what they want to reject.

Have you ever been around somebody that throws around “fifty cent” words without really having an understanding of what the word really means? Or how about someone who tries to use big words, but ends up combining parts of other words, creating a new word that sounds good but is meaningless? When I was in grade-school, I used to plummet the depths of my thesaurus, trying to find big words with which to impress my teacher. Invariably, though, I would use them out of context. The problem with using words this way is that you end up with words that are indefinable and nobody really knows what they mean. It is the same way with scripture, if you remove scripture as the authoritative definition of the church, then the church itself will find that it has no real meaning because everyone has defined for themselves a meaning that only suits their needs.

### ***Canon and Authority***

The word Canon comes from the Greek word “Κανον” (Kanon) which in turn is derived from the Hebrew word “qaneh.” The Hebrew word literally refers to a “reed” or a “rod.” In common usage, it referred to a straight rod of uniform length that could be used for measurements.<sup>2</sup> In figurative use, it was common to use the term to refer to an ideal or a standard.

The Jewish church had established a list of Canonical literature many years before the coming of Christ, so for Christians, the idea of Canon as being separate and authoritative was no new idea, they were simply building on their Jewish heritage. Those books that were included in the list of Canon were seen, as we understand them today, as God’s word itself, not mere human writings.

And since these books are God’s words, they carry a level of authority that other books do not carry. In fact, as these are God’s words, the authority that they carry is God’s authority. That means they have authority over all aspects of religion and life. The Scriptures either directly or indirectly offer answers to every question that could plague God’s people. And it also means that the authority that it carries extends not only to the first century Christian church, but it extends to us today, and it extends to the church of the future. God intended the scriptures to contain sufficient information for his people without addition, and God, knowing all things, knows the issues that we are facing today and knows the issues that will be faced in the future, and he incorporated his wisdom to face those issues into the Holy Scriptures.

Authority also means that the history that it relates is correct. God does not make mistakes, and to imply that things within the scriptures are untrue is to call God a liar, which is a very dangerous thing to do. Scripture becomes the rule of our faith and our lives. We must measure all knowledge according to the rule of scripture and not the

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that in Revelation 11: 1-2, where John is given a rod and told to measure the temple courts, the word “Κανον” is used. One can argue that John is measuring the church with the standard of scripture.

other way around. There may be times when Scripture may seem to contradict itself and there are times when Scripture seems to contradict reason, but in these situations our position must be that our understanding is lacking, not that there is an error within scripture.

Lastly, Authority means that not only is the Bible comprehensive and sufficient, giving us all that is necessary for salvation and a relationship with God and man, but it also carries authority over itself. The books of scripture are not isolated treatises. All of the New Testament is built upon the foundation of the Old Testament and all of the Old Testament points to the coming of Christ. Even within the New Testament, there is evidence that Peter, for example, was familiar with the writings of Paul when he wrote and Jude and Peter also collaborated to some extent on their writings. Different writers of scripture build upon or expound upon what other writers have written. When you are studying somebody or something within the Scriptures, you must look to see what all of the other writers have said about the same situation.

In many ways, studying the Bible is like putting a giant puzzle together. At first glance, with the pieces strewn across the table, putting the puzzle together is intimidating. You sit and wonder, how am I going to make sense out of this? Yet, slowly, with diligence and patience you can start putting small sections of the puzzle together. You start with the outer border, which provides its framework, and then work in.

Many people, when they look at the Bible are intimidated. They see 66 separate books covering all kinds of literary forms (history, poetry, letters, Gospels, prophesy, law, etc...) which covers thousands of pages of small print text. Yet, you are not putting the puzzle together alone. First of all, the Holy Spirit is going to help guide your mind through the pieces, showing you their unity, and secondly, many saints have walked this path before you, and we have a legacy of Bible commentaries and expositions to draw upon. And with diligence, the pieces will begin to fit together for you.

The puzzle of Bible study is a puzzle that will take a lifetime to put together, and then not completely. It is the lifelong task and the lifelong joy of the Christian to get to know God's revelation better and better. Yet, I can promise you this. First, all of the pieces are on the table before you. There is no missing piece that the Christian must find hidden in external revelation as the Gnostics of old said and many of the cults of today claim. Second, all of the pieces do fit together in a unified and organized way. There is no need to force pieces together where they do not belong. Third, you are working on one puzzle, not two. The Old Testament and the New Testament is not an example of God changing His mind, rather the New Testament completes what the Old began. And Fourth, God will assist you in the process of putting the pieces together as long as you are faithful to Him and continue in diligence.

### ***The New Testament Canon: Its making and history***

The New Testament Canon is not an arbitrary list of books chosen by the church fathers as some modern "scholars" would have you think. The Canon is built on theological foundations. The Old Testament Canon was closed by the Jews about 400 years before the advent of Christ to correlate with the cessation of prophesy in Israel. Since there were no more prophets, nothing that was said or written carried with it the

authority of God himself. Thus the books commonly known as the Apocrypha, as well as the many other Jewish writings during this time, were simply looked at as human documents, much like we would see a text on church history or a Biblical commentary today. They carry no more authority than any other human writing today.

Then, God sent Israel a new prophet. John the Baptist came proclaiming the message of repentance and the coming of the promised Messiah. Jesus came for the salvation of His people and fulfilled what the Old Testament had pointed toward. He called men to himself, calling them Apostles, and charging them to go forth and make disciples of all nations. God spoke through these Apostles just as he did through the Old Testament prophets. As these Apostles died, their words preserved for the church of all ages, the prophetic voice of God spoken through man once again ceased and the New Testament Canon was closed.

These books are the New Testimony of God's grace toward His people. The earliest written were probably James and Galatians, both written in the 40s or 50s, within 20 years after Jesus' death, and the last book was written in the 90s, which gives us about a 50 year window of Apostolic writings. As we look at how the church compiled these writings, it is important to remember that the early church was never without scripture or a sense of the inspired Canon. They had the Old Testament, which had been translated into Greek, called the Septuagint or the LXX<sup>3</sup>. Also, the epistles that had been written by Peter and Paul in particular had been circulated between the churches. Also the Gospel testimonies had been circulated once the first of them (probably Mark) was written in the late 50s or early 60s. As the Apostolic witness died off, their witness was preserved in their writings for the building of Christ's church.

As the church fathers began the process of weeding out the influence of non-Canonical writings from the church, there were three criteria that were used for the determination of Canonicity. The first is Apostolicity. This means that the book was written either by an Apostle or by someone who had close Apostolic connection. Matthew, John, Paul, and Peter were all Apostles, whose writings comprise the bulk of the New Testament. Mark, the earliest Gospel writer, is the John Mark mentioned in the book of Acts and 1 Peter. John Mark served as Peter's secretary in Jerusalem, and much of his Gospel is taken from the preaching of Peter, as can be seen by looking at Peter's epistles and his preaching as recorded in Acts. Luke the physician, the writer of the Gospel that bears his name as well as the book of Acts, traveled with Paul extensively on his missionary journeys as well as doing diligent research. The influence of Paul's preaching is quite clear as you study the Gospel of Luke. And James and Jude were half-brothers of Christ himself. James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and not much is known of Jude other than Peter's influence being clear as you compare Jude with 2 Peter.

The book of Hebrews is the only book that we don't know authorship for certain. Many of the early church fathers held that Hebrews was one of Paul's sermons, having been written down and circulated. Because many of the themes in Hebrews are not found

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<sup>3</sup> Called the LXX, which means 70, because the legend of its translation tells of 70 rabbis sent into 70 separate rooms to translate the Scriptures into Greek from the Hebrew. The legend continues that when these men were done, all 70 had the exact same translation. Since there are many old Septuagint scrolls with variations, the evidence does not support the legend, but it is an interesting legend and the name, LXX, has been carried through history.

elsewhere in Paul's writings, Pauline authorship is questionable (if it were a sermon, it would not need to have the typical Pauline greeting). Some have suggested that Barnabus wrote it, some Silas, some Luke, and some Apollos. For the most part, we must draw the same conclusion that the church father Origen did and say, "God only knows who wrote the book of Hebrews." Regardless of the theory, each of these people had close Apostolic connections.

This first criterion led to the church flatly rejecting pseudonymous writings. There are some people that point out that writing pseudonymously was a common practice in the first century AD. While this is true, pseudonymous writings are only found in the areas of literature. Most of the New Testament are letters and while each book in the New Testament is a literary masterpiece, none of them contain fiction. It would have been considered deceitful to have written a letter and signed someone else's name, especially in the leadership of the church. The church fathers were very careful and were quick to reject documents that were not clearly of Apostolic origin.

The second criterion was orthodoxy. They looked very carefully to make sure that the text fit with the rule of doctrine or what is also called the rule of faith. Admittedly, there are things within scripture that at first glance seem to contradict one another, but upon closer investigation, all of the pieces lock together like the pieces of a giant puzzle. If all of Scripture is God's word, then it must all be true and consistent with itself. God cannot contradict himself and he cannot lie, thus all of scripture must reflect these attributes of God.

The third criterion was the book's Christocentricity. Like Charles Spurgeon once told a young preacher, "all of scripture is like a roadmap that leads toward Jesus Christ." Obviously, there are some texts that are back roads to Christ and some that are superhighways.

There are other criteria that are stressed by later Church fathers to defend the authority of scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith defines Canonicity based on a book's inspired status. This is quite true. If a book is not inspired it does not belong in Canon. But the early church fathers were not looking in this direction. They recognized that if a writing is Apostolic, it is inspired. John Calvin also stressed the self-authenticating nature of scripture. The Holy Spirit moves in the life of believers to reveal our heavenly Father's voice as we read the text.

You must always remember, the authority of Scripture does not come from the church, but comes from God. It is not that these books were the politically correct books of the time, rather these books were inspired in their writing and God, in his providence, preserved these books for His people.



### *Some Canonical Lists*

**Muratorian Canon:** This is a second century list named after its discoverer, and Italian scholar named Muritori. It is missing the first few pages, but based on the rest of the document, the missing pages are easy to define. This list contains:

Matthew	Philippians	Jude
Mark	Colossians	1 John
Luke	Galatians	2 John
John	1 Thessalonians	Revelation
1 Corinthians	2 Corinthians	
Ephesians	2 Thessalonians	

### **The Canon of Origen (185-254):**

Matthew	Ephesians	Revelation
Mark	Philippians	1 John
Luke	Colossians	2 John
Acts	Galatians	3 John
John	1 Thessalonians	Hebrews
1 Corinthians	2 Thessalonians	
2 Corinthians	1 Peter	

### **The Canon of Eusibius (265-340):**

Eusibius breaks texts into three categories: Universally recognized, Disputed, Spurious or illegitimate:

<i>The Holy Tetrad</i>	<i><u>Universally Recognized</u></i>	<i>Plus</i>
Matthew	Romans	1 Peter
Mark	1 Corinthians	1 John
Luke	2 Corinthians	Revelation (with
John	Galatians	reservations)
	Ephesians	
	Philippians	
	Colossians	
	1 Thessalonians	
	2 Thessalonians	
	1 Timothy	
	2 Timothy	
	Titus	
	Philemon	
	Hebrews	

### Disputed Books

James	2 Peter	3 John
Jude	2 John	

### Spurious Books (these were considered orthodox but not inspired)

Acts of Paul	Teachings of the Apostles (also called the Didiche)
Shepherd of Hermas	Revelation
Apocalypse of Peter	
Epistle of Barnabus	

Eusibius also mentions some unorthodox books like the Gospel of Thomas and the Acts of Peter which he considers “the figments of Heretics” and are to be shunned.

This helps give us a picture of two things. First is that the bulk of what we consider the Canon today is consistent with what the Christian church has always held to be Scripture. And the second thing is that it reflects an understanding that the Canon was closed with the death of John, the last Apostle, and not open to addition. For a fuller listing of the developments of the specific Canons, see Appendix IV of Metzger’s book listed in the Bibliography.

### **Church Councils**

The first church council to recognize what we now know today as the New Testament Canon was the council of Hippo in North Africa in 393 AD. This was reiterated in the Third council of Carthage in 397. In 419, the Sixth Council of Carthage not only reiterated this list of Canonical books again, but it commended these books as the only ones received from our fathers and acceptable for reading in Church. It is clear both from the history of Canonical lists and from the literature that came out of these proceedings that they were not in the business of creating Canon out of thin air, but were reaffirming the Canon that had been handed down to them from their fathers in the faith.

So often, in our society, we forget that we have a spiritual heritage as well as a biological heritage. Our spiritual heritage travels through these church fathers who strove to keep the faith pure for future generations. It is valuable to ask yourself today, what kind of spiritual heritage am I leaving for those around me? Can your children look to you and claim that it was you who modeled the faith to them and kept it pure? How about your neighbors or co-workers. There is no greater blessing in life than in helping to lead someone to faith in Jesus Christ. Is your faith mature enough to do that?

Our spiritual forefathers fought heresy also. So often we fall into the same errors that people did generations ago because we are ignorant of the lines of defense that have been laid by generations long past. We run along on the spiritual battlefields feeling as if we are fighting the war all on our own and forget that trenches have already been dug and munitions have already been prepared by those who have gone ahead of us. Let us not reinvent the wheel with respect to the heresies that are plaguing our churches today.

### *Additions to Canon*

The short answer: No. The Long answer: No, No, No! The Canon is closed. It is not open to reinvention or addition, or as Luther was inclined with the epistle of James, subtraction.<sup>4</sup> The “thus saith the Lord” has ended with the death of the original Apostles. The writings that the Holy Spirit has left for us are complete and sufficient for the growth of the church, for the salvation of men, and for the fulfillment of the church’s work through history. Of course, we are not left alone in this task, the Holy Spirit moves within the lives of believers to enable us as we pursue God’s glory.

But what if? What if another letter of Paul was found. Would that be canonical? No. Paul did write other letters. For example, from reading 2 Corinthians, there was another letter to the Corinthian church that we don’t have, possibly even a second. Yet, God has given his church what she needs to grow and fulfill His plan for her. We have all of the Canonical books that were written. If there are other letters of Paul floating around, they simply were not inspired by the Holy Spirit.

That means scripture is the only rule of faith and life. All things must stand before the rubric of scripture to be validated. How do we know it is complete? Faith. The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit that Calvin talked about assures us that there are not holes in the text, but what we have is the full and special revelation of God for His people.

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<sup>4</sup> While Luther did not remove James from Scripture, he did feel that James probably did not belong and was “less inspired” than other texts.

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