

*From God to Us:
How We Got Our Bible*
by
Norman L. Geisler & William E. Nix

Chapter 9

The Development of the New Testament Canon

The history of the New Testament canon differs from that of the Old in several respects. In the first place, since Christianity was an international religion from the beginning, there was no tightly knit prophetic community which received all inspired books and collected them in one place. Local and somewhat complete collections were made from the very beginning, but there is no evidence of a central and official clearinghouse for inspired writings. Hence, the process by which all of the apostolic writings became universally accepted took many centuries. Fortunately, because of the availability of source materials there is more data available on the New Testament canon than the Old.

Another difference between the history of the Old and New Testament canons is that once discussions resulted in the recognition of the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament canon, there have been no moves within Christendom to add to it or take away from it. The extent of the New Testament canon has met with general agreement within the church universal.

THE STIMULI FOR AN OFFICIAL COLLECTION OF BOOKS

Several forces at work in the early Christian world led to an official recognition of the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament. Three of these forces are of special significance: the ecclesiastical, the theological, and the political.

The Ecclesiastical Stimulus for a Canonical List

The early church had both internal and external needs for an official recognition of canonical books. From within there was the need to know which books should be read in the churches according to the practice indicated for the New Testament church by the apostles (1 Th 5:27). From outside the church was the need to know which books should be translated into the foreign languages of the converted peoples. Without a recognized list

of books it would be difficult for the early church to perform either of these tasks. The combination of these forces put increasing pressure on the church Fathers to make an official list of the canonical books.

The Theological Stimulus for a Canonical List

Another factor within early Christianity called for an ecclesiastical pronouncement on the canon. Since all Scripture was profitable for doctrine (2 Ti 3:16-17), it became increasingly necessary to define the limits of the apostolic doctrinal deposit. The need to know which books were to be used to teach doctrine with divine authority was made even more pressing as a result of the multitude of apocryphal and heretical books claiming divine authority. When the heretic Marcion published a sharply abridged list of canonical books (c. 140), including only the gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles (omitting 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), the need for a complete canonical list became acute. Caught in the tension between those who would add to the canon and others who would take from it, the burden fell on the early church Fathers to define precisely the limits of the canon.

The Political Stimulus for a Canonical List

The forces for canonization culminated in the political pressures brought to bear on the early Christian church. The Diocletian persecutions (c. 302-305) provided a strong motive for the church to settle on a definitive list of canonical books. According to the Christian historian Eusebius, an imperial edict of Diocletian in 303 ordered "the destruction by fire of the Scriptures." Ironically enough, within twenty-five years the Emperor Constantine had become a convert to Christianity and ordered Eusebius to prepare and distribute fifty copies of the Bible. The persecution had occasioned a serious look at just which canonical books should be preserved, and the call for Bibles by Constantine also made an official list of canonical books necessary.

THE PROGRESSIVE COLLECTION AND RECOGNITION OF CANONICAL BOOKS

There is evidence to indicate that the very first believers collected and preserved the inspired books of the New Testament. These books were circulated among the early churches and doubtlessly copied as well. But since no official listing was promulgated, universal recognition was delayed several centuries until the pressures had brought about the need for such a list.

New Testament Evidence for a Growing Canon

The New Testament was written during the last half of the first century. Most of the books were written to local churches (e.g., the bulk of Paul's epistles) and some were addressed to individuals (e.g., Philemon, 2 and 3 John). Others were aimed at a broader audience, in eastern Asia (1 Peter), western Asia (Revelation) and even Europe (Romans). Some of the letters probably originated in Jerusalem (James) while others arose as far west as Rome (1 Peter). With such a geographical diversity of origin and destination it is understandable that not all the churches would immediately possess copies of all the inspired New Testament books. Add to this the problems of communication and transportation and it is easy to see that it would take some time before there was anything like a general recognition of all twenty-seven books of the New Testament canon. These difficulties notwithstanding, the early churches immediately began to make collections of whatever apostolic literature they could verify.

Selecting authentic books. From the very beginning there were inauthentic and nonapostolic writings in circulation. Because of some of these accounts of the life of Christ, Luke, the companion of Paul, undertook his gospel, saying, "inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us . . . it seemed good to me also . . . to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed" (Lk 1:1-4). The implication in Luke's prologue is that in his day (c. A.D. 60) there were already some inaccurate accounts of Christ's life in circulation.

We know for sure that the Thessalonian Christians were warned about any false epistles sent to them under the name of the apostle Paul. "We beg you, brethren," he wrote, "not to be quickly shaken in mind or excited . . . by . . . a letter purporting to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come" (2 Th 2:2). In order to verify the authenticity of his epistle he closed saying, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write" (2 Th 3:17). In addition, the letter would be sent by personal envoy from the apostle.

The apostle John further informs us that Jesus did many other signs "which are not written in this book" (Jn 20:30), for if every one were written, "I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25). From the multitude of His deeds which were not written by the apostles, there arose many beliefs about the life of Christ which demanded apostolic verification. While the original eyewitnesses of the life and resurrection of Christ were alive (Ac 1:21-22), everything could be subjected to the authority of the oral teaching or tradition of the apostles (see 1 Th 2:13; 1 Co 11:2). Some have suggested that these eyewitness traditions of the apostles formed the *kerygma* (literally, proclamation) which served as a sort of canon within the canon. Whether the *kerygma* was the criterion or not, it is clear that even the apostolic church was called upon to be selective in determining the authenticity of the many stories and sayings about Christ. In his gospel John put to rest a false belief circulating in the first-century church

which held that he would never die (Jn 21:23-24). The same apostle also issued a strong warning to believers when he wrote, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1).

In brief, there is every indication that within the first-century church, there was a selecting process at work. Every alleged word about Christ, whether oral or written was subjected to authoritative apostolic teaching. If word or work could not be verified by those who were eyewitnesses (see Lk 1:2; Ac 1:21-22), it was rejected. The apostles who could say, "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you" (1 Jn 1:3) were the final court of appeal. As another apostle wrote, "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Pe 1:16). This primary source of apostolic authority was the canon by which the first church selected the writings through which they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship (Ac 2:42). Thus the living "canon" of eyewitnesses became the criterion by which the earliest canonical writings were recognized, and God Himself bore witness to the apostles (Heb 2:3-4).

Reading authoritative books. Another indication that the process of New Testament canonization began immediately in the first-century church was the practice of official public reading of apostolic books. Paul commanded the Thessalonians, "I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren" (1 Th 5:27). Likewise, Timothy was told to present Paul's message to the churches along with the Old Testament Scriptures. "Till I come," he wrote, "attend to the public reading of the Scripture, to preaching, to teaching" (1 Ti 4:13; see also v. 11). The public reading of authoritative words from God was a practice of long standing. Moses and Joshua did it (Ex 24:7; Jos 8:34). Josiah had the Bible read to the people of his day (2 Ki 23:2) as did Ezra and the Levites when, "they read from the book, from the law of God clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Neh 8:8). The reading of apostolic letters to the churches is a continuation of this long prophetic tradition.

There is a significant passage on the reading of the apostolic letters in the churches. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans" (Col 4:16). John promised a blessing for him who reads aloud this book (Rev 1:3), which he sent to seven different churches. This clearly indicates that the apostolic letters were intended to have a broader application than merely one local congregation. They were binding on all the churches, and as the churches were receiving and reading those authoritative writings they were thereby laying the foundation of a growing collection of received writings. In brief, they were involved in an incipient process of canonization. This original acceptance of a book as one authoritatively read in the churches would be crucial to later recognition of the book as canonical.

The circulation and collection of books. There was already in New Testament times something

of a round-robin, circulated canon of inspired Scripture. At first no church possessed all the apostolic letters, but their collection grew as copies could be made and authenticated by apostolic signature or emissary. Undoubtedly the first copies of Scripture emerged from this procedure of circulating epistles. As the churches grew, the demand for copies became greater, so that more congregations could keep them for their regular readings and study along with the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Colossian passage previously cited informs us that circulation was an apostolic practice. There are also other indications of this practice. John was commanded of God, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches [of Asia Minor]" (Rev 1:11). Since it was one book and they were many churches, the book had to be circulated among them. The same is true of many of the general epistles. James is addressed to the twelve tribes in the dispersion (Ja 1:1). Peter wrote a letter to "the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Pe 1:1). Some have felt that Paul's Ephesian epistle was general since the term *Ephesians* is not in the earliest manuscripts. The letter is simply addressed "to the the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus" (Eph 1:1).

All these circulating letters reveal the beginning of a canonization process. First, the letters were obviously intended for the churches in general. Then, each church would be obliged to make copies of the letters so they would possess them for further reference and study. The commands to read and study the Scriptures in the New Testament (which include some apostolic letters) do not indicate a mere once-for-all reading. Christians were urged to continually read the Scriptures (1 Ti 4:11, 13). The only way this could be accomplished among the ever-growing number of churches was to make copies so that each church or group of churches could have its own collection of authoritative writings.

But one may wonder if there is any evidence within the New Testament that such collections were developing. Yes there is. Peter apparently possessed a collection of Paul's letters and placed them alongside the "other scriptures" (2 Pe 3:15-16). We may assume that Peter had a collection of copies of Paul's works, since there is no good reason that Peter would have possessed the original copies of Paul's epistles. After all, they were not written to Peter, but to the churches scattered throughout the world. This is indicative that other collections must have arisen to fulfill the needs of the growing churches. The fact that one writer quotes from another also indicates that letters with divine authority were collected. Jude quotes from Peter (Jude 17; see also 2 Pe 3:2), and Paul cites Luke's gospel as Scripture (1 Ti 5:18; cf., Lk 16:7). Luke assumes that Theophilus had a first book or account (Ac 1:1).

Thus, the process of canonization was at work from the very beginning. The first churches were exhorted to select only the authentic apostolic writings. When a book was verified as authentic either by signature or by apostolic envoy, it was officially read to the church and then circulated among other churches. Collections of these apostolic writings began to

take form in apostolic times. By the end of the first century all twenty-seven New Testament books were written and received by the churches. The canon was complete and all the books were recognized by believers somewhere. Because of the multiplicity of false writings and the lack of immediate access to the conditions related to the initial acceptance of a book, the debate about the canon continued for several centuries, until the church universal finally recognized the canonicity of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

THE CONFIRMATION OF THE OFFICIAL COLLECTION OF BOOKS

The confirmation of the canonicity of the New Testament is evidenced in several ways. Immediately after the times of the apostles, in the writings of the earliest Fathers, there is a recognition of the inspiration of all of the twenty-seven books. Supporting their witness are the early translations, canonical lists, and pronouncements of church councils. All together they provide a continuity of recognition from the very inception of the canon in the time of the apostles until the final confirmation of the universal church at the end of the fourth century.

The Witness of the Church Fathers to the Canon

Just over a generation following the end of the apostolic age, every book of the New Testament had been cited as authoritative by some church Father. In fact, within about two hundred years after the first century, nearly every verse of the New Testament was cited in one or more of the over thirty-six thousand citations by the Fathers (see chap. 13). Since the patristic witness to New Testament Scripture has already been reviewed (see chap. 4), it will not be repeated here.¹

The Witness of the Early Lists and Translations to the Canon

Other confirmations of the canon of the first century are found in the translations and canonical lists of the second and third centuries. Translations could not be made unless there was first a recognition of the books to be included in the translation.

The Old Syriac translation. A translation of the New Testament was circulated in Syria by the end of the fourth century which represented a text dating from the second century. It included all the twenty-seven New Testament books except 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. The noted biblical scholar B. F. Westcott observed, "Its general agreement with our own [canon] is striking and important; and its omissions admit of easy explanation."²

1 *****

2 Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 7th ed.

The omitted books were originally destined for the Western world, and the Syriac church was in the East. The distance and lack of verifying communications slowed down the final acceptance of these books in the Eastern Bible, which had come out before that evidence was available to them.

The Old Latin translation. The New Testament was translated into Latin prior to 200 and served as the Bible for the early Western church, just as the Syriac version did for the East. The Old Latin version contained every book of the New Testament with the exception of Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter. These omissions are the reverse of these in the Syriac Bible. Hebrews, 1 Peter, and probably James were written to churches at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean world. Hence, it took time for their credentials to be finally recognized in the West. Second Peter presented a special problem which will be discussed in chapter 10. What is of interest is the fact that between the two earliest Bibles in the Christian church there is a recognition of the canonicity of all twenty-seven New Testament books.

The Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170). Aside from the obviously abridged canon of the heretic Marcion (A.D. 140), the earliest canonical list is found in the Muratorian Fragment. The list of New Testament books corresponds exactly with that of the Old Latin translation, omitting only Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter. Westcott argues that there was probably a break in the manuscript which may have at one time included these books.³ It is rather unusual that Hebrews and 1 Peter should be omitted while the less frequently cited Philemon and 3 John are included.

Codex Barococcio (206). Another supporting testimony to the early canon of the New Testament comes from a codex entitled "The Sixty Books." Upon careful examination these sixty books actually include sixty-four of the familiar sixty-six canonical books of the Bible. Only Esther is omitted from the Old Testament, and Revelation from the New. The canonicity of Revelation is well attested elsewhere, being supported by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and the Muratorian list.

Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 340). The situation of the New Testament canon in the West at the beginning of the fourth century was well summarized by the historian Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* (3. 25). He listed as fully accepted all of the twenty-seven New Testament books except James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. These he listed as disputed by some, while he rejected Revelation altogether. Thus all but Revelation had gained acceptance, although several of the general epistles were not without dispute.

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 373). Whatever doubts existed in the West about some of the general epistles and Revelation were dispelled in the fifty years following Eusebius' work. Athanasius, the Father of Orthodoxy, clearly lists all twenty-seven books of the New Testament as canonical (*Letters* 3. 267.5). Within a generation both Jerome and Augustine

(New York: Macmillan, 1896), pp. 249-50.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

had confirmed the same list of books, and these twenty-seven books remained the accepted canon of the new Testament (see Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2. 8. 13).

The Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397). The supporting witness to the canon of the New Testament was not limited to individual voices. Two local councils ratified the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament. The variation on the Old Testament canon accepted by these councils has already been discussed in chapter 8. There is also a list from the Synod of Laodicea (343-381) which includes all except Revelation; but eleven scholars have questioned the genuineness of this list.

Since the fifth century the church has accepted these twenty-seven books as the New Testament canon. Although subsequently there have been disputes about the Old Testament, the Christian church in all of its main branches continues to this day to recognize only these twenty-seven books of the New Testament as apostolic.

To summarize, the process of collecting authentic apostolic literature began within New Testament times. In the second century, there was verification of this literature by quotation of the divine authority of each of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. In the third century, doubts and debates over certain books culminated in the fourth century with the decisions of influential Fathers and councils. Through the centuries since that time, the Christian church has maintained the canonicity of these twenty-seven books.

Geisler, Normal L., Nix, William E. *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1974.
Note: No change of any kind has been made to the text.