

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

by Henry C. Thiessen

Henry C. Thiessen's scholarly examination of the formation and authority of the New Testament canon, exploring how the early Church recognized and collected its sacred writings.

1 Chapters

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The Canon of the New Testament Henry Clarence Thiessen In our approach to the study of the New Testament we are first of all confronted with the question, How came these twenty-seven books, and these only, to be considered our New Testament? Have they, and they only, always been received by all? Is there good ground for regarding them, and them only, as the authoritative New Testament? In other words, we must begin with the question of the Canon of the New Testament. The Word Canon The word canon comes from the Greek *kanon*, and has at least three meanings: 1. Literally it means a straight rod or bar, as a ruler used by masons and carpenters; then as keeping something straight; then as testing straightness... 2. Metaphorically it means that which serves to measure, a rule, norm, or standard; thus the Alexandrian grammarians spoke of the classical Greek writers as the "canons," i. e., models, of composition... 3. Passively it means that which has been measured and accepted. In the New Testament the term occurs but four times: In 2 Corinthians 1:1-24 O;13, 15, 16, where it refers to the "province" that had been marked off for Paul; and in Galatians 6:16, where it refers to the "standard" according to which Paul wanted believers to walk. In the history of the Church the word was first used of the doctrines that were accepted as the rule of faith and practice...

...the term canon gradually came to be applied to the recognized books of the Church. By and by these books were set down in lists, and thus the term came to be applied to the books that were contained in the authoritative lists.

1. The Origin of the Books of the New Testament

It must be remembered that for almost twenty years after the ascension of Christ none of the books of our New Testament were even written, and that about sixty-five years elapsed before the last book was written. James is perhaps the earliest book, having been written before A. D. 49, and the Apocalypse is certainly the latest, dating from about 95. During most of this time the early church had the Old Testament as its only Bible... The Jewish Christians recognized both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Septuagint, as is evident from the many quotations in the New Testament from both; the Gentiles, who could neither read nor understand the Hebrew, accepted the Septuagint only. The Oral and Written Message As we have intimated, the Gospel was first proclaimed by word of mouth. Since the original apostles were the leaders in the Christian movement and they, no doubt, again and again repeated the story about Christ in much the same words, the Gospel early received a kind of stereotyped form. To the oral message there were soon added a number of short narratives, more or less complete and more or less accurate, of the life and ministry of Christ. When a community had received the oral message, the need for an authoritative written interpretation of the facts in the life of Christ, together with their application to life, became apparent. The Pauline and other Epistles were written to meet this need. About the same time and a little later the need for authentic accounts of the life of Christ itself became apparent. The Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John were written to supply this need. The Book of Acts was called for by the need for an authentic history of the Apostolic period, and the

Apocalypse was written to set forth God's revelation of the consummation of all things. Thus there appeared the inspired and authoritative literature, known to us as the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles, and the Apocalypse, which the church used alongside of the Old Testament.

2. The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament

1. After a Gospel or an Epistle had been written, it would remain for some time the treasured possession of the individual or the church that had received it.

2. In some cases the originals would be passed from church to church (as for example Colossians and perhaps Ephesians), but they would, no doubt always find their way back to the original recipient of them.

3. By and by the originals were more freely circulated and copied.

4. Undoubtedly often individuals and churches would make copies of the document in their possession and send them to other individuals and churches,

5. and sometimes individuals and churches may have sent scribes to make copies at the place where the originals were found.

Thus gradually the churches all over the world would obtain a more or less complete set of the inspired writings of the new dispensation.

...Westcott says: "From the close of the second century the history of the Canon is simple, and its proof clear. It is allowed even by those who have reduced the genuine Apostolic works to the narrowest limits, that from the time of Irenaeus the New Testament was composed essentially of the same books which we receive at the present, and that they were regarded with the same reverence as is now shown to them." 11 These facts must not be attributed to the "uncritical" judgment of the early church; for Westcott says again: "All the Fathers at the close of the second century agree in appealing to the testimony of antiquity as proving the authenticity of the books which they used as Christian Scriptures. And the appeal was made at a time when it was easy to try its worth."12

Four Tests There were four things which aided in the determination of which books should be accepted as canonical.

1. The first was apostolicity: was the book written by an apostle, or, if not, did the author of the book sustain such a relation to an apostle as to raise his book to the level of the apostolic books? The latter question was especially used in determining the canonicity of the Gospel of Mark, The Gospel of Luke, the Book of Acts, and the Epistle to the Hebrews.

2. The second was contents: were the contents of a given book of such a spiritual character as to entitle it to this rank? On the basis of this test most of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books were eliminated and the ones which we now have retained.

3. The third was universality: was the book universally received in the church? (homologoumena) It is this test that further aided in the elimination of the unworthy books; but it also perpetuated the debate about the canonicity of the so-called antilegomena (the books more or less opposed for awhile) for a long time.

4. The final test was inspiration: did the book give evidence of being divinely inspired? This was the ultimate test; everything finally had to give way to it. Angus-Green say:

"The Holy Spirit, given to the Church, quickened holy instincts, aided discernment between the genuine and the spurious, and thus led to gradual, harmonious, and in the end unanimous conclusions. There was in the Church what a modern divine has happily termed an 'inspiration of selection'."¹³ No Early Church Council

It is remarkable fact that no early Church Council selected the books that should constitute the New Testament Canon. The books that we now have crushed out all rivals, not by any adventitious authority, but by their own weight and worth. This is in itself a strong proof of the genuineness and authenticity of the books that have survived. It is not until the close of the fourth century that any Council even discussed the subject.

Overall Conclusion In conclusion we may set down the following definite facts regarding the formation of the New Testament Canon. There was no early counciliar action that determined which books should be recognized and which not; the selection and acceptance of the books was a spontaneous process that went on throughout the Church. As we have seen, at the close of the second century the New Testament contained essentially the same books which we now receive and they were regarded with the same respect that Christians have for them today. During the third century the canonicity of the so-called antilegomena was debated. In the East there was especial opposition to the Apocalypse; in the West, to the Epistle to the Hebrews. By the end of that century practically all the extracanonial books had been dropped from the list of authoritative books. During the fourth century the debate concerning the Canon was practically concluded in the West. Undoubtedly the influence of Athanasius in the East as well as that of Jerome and Augustine in the West had much to do with this result. The action of the Third Council of Carthage (397) stabilized the decision reached, and from that time on there was little further opposition to any of the books in the West. In the East the debate with regard to some of the books was prolonged for some time further. Finally the influence of Athanasius and the great Cappadocian fathers, and the example of the West, swept away all opposition. With the Philoxenian addition of 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, and the Apocalypse to the Peshitta, the question was virtually closed in the East also. Thus we may say that for the West the question was practically closed by the end of the fourth century; for the East, by the close of the fifth century.

FOOTNOTES 11. On the Canon of the New Testament, p. 6.

12. Op.cit., p. 314.

13. The Cyclopedic Handbook to the Bible, p. 36.

Introduction to the New Testament. Henry Clarence Thiessen. Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. Grand Rapids, MI. 1971, Chapter 1, pages 3-30.

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