

Grace Strother

John Munroe

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The Formation of the New Testament Canon

Though many modern Christians accept as self-evident the divine inspiration of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, the formation of the canon, or list of books, spanned centuries and involved much debate (Metzger 1; Reid). Within the first generations of the Church, the rapid growth of heretical sects and the Church's internal dialogue spurred the development of an authoritative canon. The process began in earnest during the second century A.D. and ended definitively within the Catholic Church with the Council of Trent in 1546.

Shortly after the end of the apostolic age in the early 100s A.D., a number of individuals began propagating heretical teachings while claiming they were authentically Christian. Marcion, for example, taught the just God of the Old Testament was different from and inferior to the loving God of the New Testament, and he recognized only Paul's epistles and Luke's Gospel as canonical, believing the other apostles had misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented Jesus (Metzger 91-2). Marcion still found it necessary to redact even this minimal canon, removing content suggesting the humanity of Jesus or continuity between Judaism and Christianity (Metzger 93). Though Marcion's is the first known instance of a New Testament canon, the Church was already developing a sense of scriptural authority with regard to the four-fold Gospel (i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and the Pauline epistles (Metzger 99).

In contrast, Gnostic Christians wished to add to rather than limit the nascent canon, claiming their sacred texts had apostolic origins and revealed teachings of Jesus omitted from the four-fold Gospel (Metzger 77-8). In addition, the sect known as Montanism recorded the ecstatic prophecies of their leader and two prophetesses, claiming divine inspiration for these oracles (Metzger 100). In reaction to these movements and others like them, the Church saw the need to determine not only what books belonged in the canon but what books had to be excluded because of their questionable pedigrees or unorthodox teachings (Metzger 106).

The New Testament canon's first stage of formation occurred in the second century A.D. as the four-fold Gospel and Paul's thirteen epistles organically attained canonical status due to their unmistakable apostolic origin (Reid). Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the apostle John, and Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of Ignatius, cite in their own writings at the beginning of the second century Matthew, Luke, and John as having the same degree of authority as the Old Testament scriptures (Reid). Irenaeus, writing against Marcionites between 182 and 188, defends the canonicity of all four Gospels (Reid). The Pauline epistles followed a similar trajectory with the early Church Fathers, as Ignatius and Polycarp cite a number of these letters as having special authority and Irenaeus later accepts all but Philemon as canonical (Reid). A New Testament canon found in the Muratorian Fragment, perhaps dating back to the second century, includes all thirteen Pauline epistles (Reid).

As consensus took shape around the four-fold Gospel and the Pauline epistles, the focus of the Church's discernment shifted in the third and fourth centuries to the books of more uncertain status. Origen and his disciple Eusebius compiled lists of potential entrants to the canon, dividing them by degree of certainty. For example, Eusebius includes in his list of unquestionably canonical books the four Gospels, Paul's thirteen epistles, the Letter to the

Hebrews, Acts, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation (Reid). He lists some books he hopes will be accepted as canonical, like James, 2 John, and 3 John (Reid). Finally, Eusebius names texts, like Barnabas and the Didache, that he personally rejects but are accepted in other Christian churches (Reid). In 367 Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, published the first known instance of the New Testament canon as we know it today (Metzger 7). Shortly afterward at the Synod of Rome in 382, Pope Damasus, with much input from Jerome, issued a canon identical to Athanasius', and the Church has used it since that time (Reid). It includes the remaining books whose status had remained in question for generations: Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 3 John (Reid).

For more than a millennium the New Testament canon remained largely unchallenged (Reid). During the upheaval of the sixteenth century, Protestant reformers proposed innovations to the canon. Luther, for example, rejected the canonicity of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation, but the Calvinists and Anglicans did not follow suit, putting pressure on Luther's disciples to return to the traditional New Testament canon (Reid). In 1546 the Council of Trent declared dogmatically the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, making no distinctions among them with regard to degree of canonicity or divine inspiration (Nichols 100; Reid).

The New Testament canon, often regarded in modern times—if considered at all—as a fully formed and unquestioned product of the apostolic era, is rather a gift of the Church refined over centuries through debates with heretics and generations of ecclesial discernment. The canon quickly began to coalesce around the four Gospels and Paul's epistles, and as Church leaders grew in their understanding of the apostolic faith, consensus gradually grew around the remaining books, resulting in the biblical table of contents so familiar to Christians today.

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