

Ten Basic Facts About the NT Canon that Every Christian Should

Memorize, by Michael Kruger (available at michaeljkruger.com)

1. The NT Books are the Earliest Christian Writings We Possess
2. Apocryphal Writings are All Written in the Second Century or Later
3. The NT Books Are Unique Because They Are Apostolic Books
4. Some NT Writers Quote Other NT Writers as Scripture
5. The Four Gospels are Well Established by the End of the Second Century
6. At the End of the Second Century, the Muratorian Fragment lists 22 of our 27 NT books
7. Early Christians Often Used Non-Canonical Writings
8. The NT Canon Was Not Decided at Nicea—Nor Any Other Church Council
9. Christians Did Disagree about the Canonicity of Some NT Books
10. Early Christians Believed that Canonical Books were Self-Authenticating

Recommended resource on the development of the NT canon:

Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*

John Meade and Peter Gurry, *Scribes and Scripture: The Amazing Story of How We Got the Bible*

Today is the final class for the NT Survey. Thank you for your participation! I hope you've enjoyed the class. I would appreciate any feedback you have to offer or further discussion if you're interested: parker@crossroadsbiblechurch.com

New Testament Survey

Class 34: The Canon of the New Testament

Keys to understanding the development of the NT canon

- The early church recognized Scripture (as the authoritative word of God) before they ever defined the canon (list of sanctioned writings). In other words, the NT writings were recognized, not chosen.
- Canonization was not a decision from a council, but reflected broad recognition by the majority of churches
- Dependent on God's providential exposure and maintenance

Here is a brief history of key stages in the development of the NT:

1. Recognition of the unique status of the NT writings began with the apostles themselves.

The apostles assumed that their own writings and those of the other apostles were authoritative because they were the word of God.

- a. Paul claimed his own writings were God's authoritative word (1 Cor 14:37; cf. also 1 Thes 2:13, contrast 1 Thes 5:20-21).
- b. Peter equated Paul with Scripture (2 Pet 3:15-16)
- c. Paul quoted Luke as Scripture (1 Tim 5:18, quoting Deut 25:4 and Luke 10:7)

2. What about forgeries?

- a. From the very beginning, the church was taught to reject pseudonymous letters (2 Thess. 2:2)
- b. The early church carefully tested the writings that they received in order to verify that they were authentically apostolic (see Irenaus, *Against Heresies*, and Eusebius, *Church History*).
- c. Numerous books were considered and even used by some but ultimately rejected (e.g., epistle of Barnabas; Shepherd of Hermas, apocalypse of Peter)

- 3. Early church leaders cited the NT writings as Scripture.** The concept of authoritative Scripture was already inherent in the NT writings, and therefore we should not be surprised that the early church leaders quoted widely from the NT writings and treated them as authoritative. In the late first century or early second century alone:
- We have one letter from Clement of Rome (*1 Clement*, c. 95 AD) in which he quotes from 8 NT books (Mt, Mk, Lk, Acts, 1 Cor, Titus, Heb, 1 Pet).
 - Ignatius of Antioch (martyred under Trajan, 98-117 AD) wrote seven letters in which he quotes 13 NT books (most of the letters of Paul plus James and 1 Peter).
 - Polycarp of Smyrna's letter to the Philippians (c.110 AD) quotes Mt, Mk, Lk, Acts, 7 letters of Paul, plus Heb and 1 Pet.

These citations are incidental, with no intention of creating a comprehensive list, and yet they quote 19 of the 27 NT writings, and show striking consistency across geographic distance (Antioch in the East, Smyrna in Asia Minor, and Rome in the West).

These writers treated the NT as authoritative, and generally distinguished its usage from other Christian writings.

- 4. The core of the NT was in use throughout the entire church and recognized as authoritative by the second century.**
- The four gospels were recognized as the only canonical gospels. The letters of Paul (including Hebrews) were quite popular and probably transmitted as a unit in a single codex. Acts, 1 Peter, and 1 John were broadly used.
 - The Muratorian fragment (c. 180 AD) is a fragmentary manuscript that lists 22 of the eventual 27 NT writings, with a couple of additions that were later rejected.
 - In the second century, Irenaeus (130-200 AD), the bishop of Lyon in Gaul, quoted every book of the NT except Philemon, James, 2

Peter, and 3 John. He treats the NT writings as Scripture, the authoritative word of God.

- 5. Debates continued into the third century over books that were less frequently used and where some uncertainty remained.**
- In the surviving works of Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215 AD) we have quotations from all but 3 of the NT writings. He lists several other works he considered useful but which weren't universally accepted (Barnabas, Didache, etc.).
 - Tertullian (c.155-220 AD) quoted from all but 4 of the NT writings, and accused the false teacher Marcion of excluding some of the sacred writings, implying a clear sense of the authoritative body of the NT. He was the first to speak of a "New Testament."
 - However, the earliest surviving *list* of all 27 NT writings comes from the mid-third century. The Alexandrian teacher Origen listed the entire NT in an allegorical description c. 250 AD (Homilies on Joshua 7.1).
 - In the 4th century (c.320 AD), Eusebius summarized the whole history of the debates in all the churches regarding the NT. Although he lists some ongoing hesitation, he affirms the final 27 books. The key elements for recognition were apostolic origin and corporate reception.
- 6. Regional church councils occasionally made statements about the canon** (e.g., at Laodicea, Hippo, Carthage, but not Nicaea). However, the fact that multiple councils felt compelled to make declarations shows that they were not authoritative rulings, otherwise it wouldn't have to be made more than once. As late as the Council of Trent (1660s) the Roman Catholic church was making pronouncements about their canon by including deuterocanonical books.