

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

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The New Testament?**

*Should Any Books Be
Added Or Subtracted?*

By

Don Stewart

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The Christian Church began with the acceptance of a group of sacred writings that were already in existence—the Old Testament. There is undeniable evidence that the books contained in the Hebrew Old Testament were accepted as authoritative by the Jews, Jesus, His apostles, and those in the early church. The extent of the Old Testament was clear to everyone. Therefore, the church already had its own canon from the first day of its existence.

However, with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world, the One to whom the Law and the Prophets spoke about, the need arose for a “New” Testament. Certain writings about Jesus were read to the believers in the churches; they were copied, circulated, exchanged with other churches, and eventually collected.

Today, we have a New Testament that records the life and ministry of Jesus, as well as the continuation of His ministry through His followers.

The question arises, “What evidence do we have that the writings currently found in the New Testament are the exact books, no more and no less, that God intended?”

Why should these twenty-seven books be separated from all other literature that was written about Jesus and His apostles? Can we be certain that the New Testament is divinely inspired, like the Old Testament? Are these the exact books which God has given to the human race?

This book will examine in detail the question of the New Testament canon of Scripture. Among other things, we will look at the different sources of authority for the first Christians. We will find out where they believed ultimate authority resided.

We will also consider the various books that are presently part of the New Testament and look at the reasons for their inclusion in the canon.

It is also necessary to have an overview of the historical process that led to their recognition by God’s people. We will discover why these books were received as authoritative by the church, and why other books were not.

Through all of this, we will find that there is sufficient evidence to believe that our present canon of Scripture is made up of exactly the right number of books that God gave to humanity with nothing added and nothing deleted.

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Question 1

What Were The Various Sources Of Authority For The First Christians?

What was the ultimate authority for those who believed in Jesus Christ? What sources guided them? Where did they go for the final word on all matters of faith and practice?

The First Christians Had Four Sources Of Authority

The early Christians had four separate sources of authority that led and guided them. This included the Old Testament Scripture, the actual words of Jesus, the interpretation of Jesus' words by His Apostles, and the writings of the Apostles. The evidence is as follows.

1. The Old Testament Scripture Was Authoritative For Christians

The first generation of Christians did not possess a New Testament canon, but they did have a Bible, or a canon of Scripture. The Bible, for the early Christians, was the Hebrew Scriptures—the Old Testament. Since the first Christians were Jews, they inherited the Old Testament as their sacred Scripture. To them it was the ultimate authority on any matter to which it spoke. Appeal to the Old Testament Scripture was always decisive.

For example, we find that Jesus appealed to the Old Testament at the very beginning of His public ministry. Mark records the following:

After John had been arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: 'The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent, and believe the gospel' (Mark 1:14 REB).

This would remind the people of that which was written by the prophet Daniel:

In the times of those kings the God of heaven will establish a kingdom which will never be destroyed, nor will it ever pass to another people; it will shatter all these kingdoms and make an end of them, while it will itself endure for ever (Daniel 2:44 REB).

Therefore, Jesus' ministry began with a reference to the everlasting kingdom of God coming to the earth.

We also read in the gospel of Luke how God the Father was pleased to give the kingdom to believers. Jesus said:

Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32 CSB)

The kingdom of God, promised in the Old Testament, was to be given to those who believed in Jesus.

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When tempted by the devil, Jesus answered him with Scripture. Matthew records Jesus saying the following at His temptation:

It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' . . . Jesus said to him, "Once again it is written: 'You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.'" . . . Then Jesus said to him, "Go away, Satan! For it is written: 'You are to worship the Lord your God and serve only him'" (Matthew 4:4,7,10 NET).

The New Revised Standard Version translates these verses in this manner:

But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' . . . Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" . . . Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (Matthew 4:4,7,10 NRSV).

After Jesus' resurrection, we again find Him appealing to Scripture to back up His claims. Luke writes:

He said to them, "Remember when I was with you before? I said that everything written about me must happen--everything in the law of Moses, the books of the prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44 NCV).

Obviously, to Jesus, the Hebrew Scripture was the authoritative Word of God.

The same is true for Paul. In writing to the church at Rome, Paul cited the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture. He said:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord (Romans 12:19 NIV).

The Apostle Peter also accepted the divine authority of Scripture. He said:

Because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16 NKJV).

The phrase, "it is written" speaks of an authoritative group of writings that can be cited to settle all matters of belief and practice. Therefore, those who lived at the time of Jesus had a closed canon of authoritative Scripture.

Furthermore, the Hebrew Scriptures, even after Jesus' death and resurrection, were still considered to be God's Holy Word. They were continually cited as authoritative Scripture.

2. The Words Of Jesus Held Absolute Authority

Along with the Old Testament Scripture, the words of Jesus held absolute authority for the first Christians. His words settled the matter on any issue.

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While Jesus accepted the absolute authority of the Hebrew Scriptures, He claimed that He had authority that went beyond them. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible makes this claim:

And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes (Matthew 7:28,29 NKJV).

The early church treated the words of Jesus as having equal or superior authority to that of the Old Testament. When Jesus spoke on a particular subject, His words were regarded as the final word on the matter.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

For we tell you this by the word of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:15 NET).

The word of the Lord would be the ultimate authority. On one occasion, Paul told the believers to remember the words of Jesus:

And I have been a constant example of how you can help the poor by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35 NLT).

Jesus' words were to be remembered and obeyed. Consequently, along with the Old Testament Scripture, the words of Jesus held absolute authority.

3. The Preaching And Teaching Of The Apostles Had The Same Authority As Jesus

The apostles were the official representatives of Jesus. After His ascension into heaven, they interpreted His words and deeds. Their interpretations were considered to be absolutely authoritative. When the apostles taught, it had the same authority as Jesus' teaching. They carried on His teaching and added further explanations to the meaning of His ministry. The Apostle John wrote:

Now this is the gospel message we have heard from him and announce to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5 NET).

The apostles heard the message from Jesus and announced it to others. The first Christians recognized this unique authority of Jesus' apostles. They obeyed their commands and accepted their teachings about Jesus.

4. The Writings Of The Apostles And Their Associates Were Absolutely Authoritative

Along with the Old Testament, the words of Jesus, and the authoritative interpretations by the Apostles, the apostolic writings were also given unique authority. They were accepted with the same authority as their oral teachings. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about his authority:

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Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions, just as I passed them on to you (1 Corinthians 11:1,2 NIV).

Those who believed in Jesus knew that He had authorized His chosen apostles to do His work. This occurred during His public ministry as well as after He ascended into heaven—they were His living voice. Whether they spoke about Jesus or wrote about Him, their words were the words of Christ.

For example, Paul, as an apostle, had the authority to communicate God's truth to congregations that he had not even visited—such as the church in Rome and the church in Colosse. His authority was such that he could instruct them without ever having been physically present with the believers.

Even those who were critics of Paul recognized the power in his writings:

His [Paul's] letters are weighty and forceful (2 Corinthians 10:10 NET).

The believers, therefore, were expected to obey the writings of Jesus' hand-picked representatives. This would be true for all the people who lived after the time of the apostles—they were also required to accept their teachings and obey their commands. Consequently, the words of the apostles needed to be carefully preserved.

Thus, we find the early church had four sources of divine authority which they were to obey—the Old Testament, Jesus' words, the spoken words of the apostles, and the written words of the apostles and their associates.

Summary To Question 1 What Were The Various Sources Of Authority For The First Christians?

The first generation of Christians looked to four different sources of ultimate authority from which they could derive truth. First, they had the written authority of the Hebrew Scripture. From the first day of their existence, they had a canon of Scripture that was authoritative. In these Scriptures, they saw the predictions of the coming of Christ. The words of Jesus were of the highest authority for those in the early church. His teaching on any subject was the last word—there was no greater authority than Him. Jesus specifically called and commissioned a number of men to be the infallible interpreters of His message. They orally spread His teachings. These teachings of these apostles, with respect to the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were held with the utmost authority.

Finally, the writings of the apostles and their immediate associates were considered on the same level as their teachings—they were absolutely authoritative. Those who had been given Jesus' authority expected their writings to be understood and obeyed. These, therefore, were the four sources which the first Christians accepted as divinely authoritative.

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Question 2

What Do We Learn From The New Testament Itself About The Need For A New Testament Canon?

Those who lived at the time of Jesus had the Old Testament as their divinely authoritative Scripture. However, as we look at the New Testament, we can learn a number of things about the possibility of further Scriptures that would add to God's revelation of Himself to humanity. A number of important points need to be made.

1. From The Old Testament There Was An Expectation For More Scripture

The Old Testament canon closed with the expectation of more revelation to come. The Lord said the following things through the prophet Malachi:

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty (Malachi 3:1 NIV).

The Lord promised to send a messenger that would prepare the way for the Lord Himself. This messenger would be the prophet, Elijah. Malachi also wrote:

See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse (Malachi 4:5,6 NIV).

The Old Testament closes with this promise of the coming of Elijah who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. Consequently, we would not expect any further Scripture to be written until the long-awaited Messiah came on the scene.

Yet, with the coming of the Messiah, we would expect additional Scripture to be composed.

2. God's Promises Come True: The Messiah Came To The World

As always, the promises of God come true. The expectation of the coming Messiah was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. His life and ministry would eventually necessitate a New Testament to be written.

We find that the Old Testament predicted that Elijah was to come before the Messiah arrived. Elijah did come in the person of John the Baptist. Jesus made it clear that John the Baptist fulfilled the role of Elijah. Matthew writes:

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His disciples asked, “Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?” Jesus replied, “Elijah is indeed coming first to set everything in order. But I tell you, he has already come, but he wasn’t recognized, and he was badly mistreated. And soon the Son of Man will also suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples realized he had been speaking of John the Baptist (Matthew 17:10-13 NLT).

Jesus’ Words Were Authoritative

The moment Jesus began His public ministry His words were regarded as divinely authoritative. We find Jesus comparing His words to those who had gone before Him:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27,28 NIV).

Matthew wrote about Jesus’ authority. He stated it this way:

When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed by his teaching, because he taught them like one who had authority, not like their experts in the law (Matthew 7:28,29 NET).

The words of Jesus were enough to settle any matter.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about how to conduct the Lord’s Supper, he referred to what he had been taught by the Lord:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread (1 Corinthians 11:23 NIV).

There is no doubt about how the church viewed the authority of the words of Jesus. Whatever He said carried God’s divine authority.

3. Jesus Gave His Chosen Apostles His Authority While He Was Here On The Earth

Jesus gave His authority to His hand-picked disciples while He was here on the earth. When Jesus first sent out the twelve disciples, He gave them absolute authority. The Bible says:

Jesus called his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits so they could cast them out and heal every kind of disease and sickness . . . As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near. ‘Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give’ (Matthew 10:1,7,8 NET).

The authority that Jesus gave was not limited to the twelve disciples. We find that it was also given to a wider group. On another occasion, Jesus

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sent out seventy disciples with His authority and His miraculous power. Luke records it as follows:

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go ... Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you"(Luke 10:1,8,9 NRSV).

They came back testifying to God's power. Luke records the following:

The Seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in Your name." He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a lightning flash. Look, I have given you the authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; nothing will ever harm you. However, don't rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:17-20 CSB).

Hence, we find that Jesus' authority was given to a select group of people for a special purpose.

4. Jesus Said That He Would Tell His Disciples More Things After His Death

Jesus also promised His disciples that more truth would be revealed after He left the world. On the night of His betrayal, He said to them:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear (John 16:12 NIV).

This set the stage for further revelation to come. His words guaranteed further additions to Scripture.

5. Jesus Made Promises Concerning The Holy Spirit

Before Jesus died, He promised His disciples that the Holy Spirit would come and teach them all truth:

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you (John 16:13,14 NIV).

Jesus also promised that the Holy Spirit would bring back to the remembrance of these disciples all things that Jesus had taught them. John recorded Jesus saying:

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26 NIV).

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The New Living Translation translates the verse in this manner:

But when the Father sends the Counselor as my representative - and by the Counselor I mean the Holy Spirit - he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I myself have told you (John 14:26 NLT).

Jesus also said that the Holy Spirit would testify of Him:

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me (John 15:26 NIV).

The Holy Spirit would take the place of Jesus on the earth. He would represent the risen Lord—He would not speak about Himself.

6. Jesus Give His Handpicked Disciples His Same Authority After He Left The Earth

When Jesus appeared to His disciples on the day of His resurrection, He again gave them the same authority as Himself. John writes:

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:21-23 NIV).

The New King James Version translates these verses as follows:

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21-23 NKJV).

In the same manner that the Father had commissioned Jesus, so Jesus gave His authority to His disciples. They were given unique authority to proclaim His Words and deeds.

Consequently, they were more than mere teachers and preachers of Jesus’ message—they were authoritative channels of God’s Word.

The unique authority that Jesus had given His specially selected disciples before His resurrection was also given to them after His resurrection.

7. There Were Special Credentials Necessary For An Apostle

The Apostles were drawn from a group of men that had special credentials. They had to have been with Jesus from John’s baptism to Jesus’ ascension. This became evident when the traitor Judas was replaced.

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We read in the Book of Acts about the qualifications that were necessary to become one of the “Twelve.” Peter said:

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection (Acts 1:21-22 NIV).

They would have to be able to testify as to what they saw and heard. Sometime later, John wrote the following:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3 NIV).

Only these select men had this unique authority of Jesus. There is no evidence that it was passed down to a second generation.

8. The Apostles Spoke And Acted With Jesus’ Authority

After Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, those who had been His intimate disciples spoke with the same authority as their Lord. Everything could be subject to their authority.

Peter said the following to a lame man whom he met at the entrance to the temple:

Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong (Acts 3:6.7 NET).

Their authority was even recognized by the unbelieving religious rulers. We read the following in the Book of Acts:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13 NIV).

The unique authority of the apostles was evident to all.

9. There Was A Body Of Truth From The Beginning

From the beginning, there was a body of truth that was taught by these men. This is known as the Apostles’ doctrine, or the Apostles’ teaching. The following was said of the early church:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42 NIV).

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God bore witness to this truth with visible signs and wonders. The writer to the Hebrews said:

How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2:3,4 NIV).

It was essential that the teaching was consistent with the doctrine of Christ. We read in the Book of Revelation how prophecy, or the proclamation of God's Word, testified of Jesus.

I bowed at his feet to worship him. But he told me, "Don't do that! I am your coworker and a coworker of the Christians who hold on to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God, because the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy!" (Revelation 19:10 God's Word).

It is clear that God has revealed a certain body of truth to believers. This system of teaching consistently testified to Jesus.

10. The Apostles Wrote With The Same Authority As They Spoke

Not only did the Apostles speak with authority, they also wrote with authority. We find that the writers of the New Testament wrote with the same authority in which they taught. Paul declared:

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts (1 Thessalonians 2:3,4 NIV).

Paul reminded the Corinthians of his authority. He wrote:

If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command (1 Corinthians 14:37 NET).

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, He exercised his authority as an apostle. He made this clear when he said the following:

Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you (1 Thessalonians 4:8 NRSV).

In his next letter, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about holding on to the traditions which they had been taught:

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15 NRSV).

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The writings of the apostles carried the same authority as their preaching.

11. The Apostles Issued Commands In The Name Of Christ

Paul issued commands in the name of Jesus Christ. He wrote to the Thessalonians:

And now, dear brothers and sisters, we give you this command with the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ: Stay away from any Christian who lives in idleness and doesn't follow the tradition of hard work we gave you (2 Thessalonians 3:6 NLT).

Paul also wrote to the Thessalonians:

Take note of those who refuse to obey what we say in this letter. Stay away from them so they will be ashamed (2 Thessalonians 3:14 NLT).

The apostles were also needed to verify or deny rumors.

For example, a rumor arose that Jesus promised John that he would not die. John himself corrected that rumor. He recorded exactly what Jesus did say and what He did not say. We read in John's gospel:

Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?" (John 21:23-24 NET).

The commands and teachings of the apostles were accepted with the same complete authority as Jesus' words.

12. The Apostles Had The Same Authority As The Old Testament Prophets

Those who held the office of apostle claimed the same authority as the Old Testament prophets. Peter wrote:

Keep in mind what the holy prophets said, and the command of our Master and Savior that was passed on by your apostles (2 Peter 3:2 MsgB).

This was quite a claim. These New Testament apostles were considered to be on an equal level as the major Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah.

In fact, to lie to the apostles was the same as lying to the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit is God, then lying to the apostles is the same as lying to God. We discover this in the episode of Ananias and Sapphira; two believers who lied to the apostles. The Bible says:

He [Ananias] brought part of the money to the apostles, but he claimed it was the full amount. His wife had agreed to this deception. Then

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Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself. The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren’t lying to us but to God” (Acts 5:2-4 NLT).

Clearly, they carried Jesus’ authority. Lying to them was the same as lying to God:

13. Paul Said It Was The Holy Spirit Who Revealed Truth To Him

Paul said the Holy Spirit revealed certain truth to him. He wrote the following to the Corinthians:

But as Scripture says: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined the things that God has prepared for those who love him.” God has revealed those things to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, especially the deep things of God. After all, who knows everything about a person except that person's own spirit? In the same way, no one has known everything about God except God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-11 God’s Word).

Paul then went on to say that his teaching originated from the Holy Spirit:

And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual (1 Corinthians 2:13 NRSV)

Consequently, the commands that Paul gave to the church were not his own, but rather the Lord’s. Thus, they were expected to be obeyed.

The apostles, therefore, had the authority to speak, as well as write down, God’s own words. These words had the same authority as Old Testament Scripture.

14. The Words And Writings Of The Apostles Were Received With The Same Authority As Jesus’ Words

The spoken words, as well as the writings of the Apostles, were received by the church as having ultimate authority. The writings of the apostles were received with the same unique authority as their spoken ministry:

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers (1 Thessalonians 2:13 NRSV).

The authority of the apostolic writings was recognized by the church. They realized the special authority that God had given to these men.

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15. **The Writings Of The Apostles Were Read Out Loud Like Old Testament Scripture**

One line of evidence that shows the writings of the apostles were considered authoritative is that they were publicly read out loud to the congregations.

The Old Testament Scripture Was Read Out Loud

In the Old Testament, it was the custom to read the sacred writings out loud. We find that Moses read the words of the Lord to the people. The Bible says:

And he [Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “We are willing to do and obey all that the Lord has spoken” (Exodus 24:7 NET).

We are also told that Joshua read God’s Word to the people. In the Book of Joshua, the following incident is recorded:

Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—just as it is written in the Book of the Law (Joshua 8:34 NIV).

Ezra read the Scripture to the people. We are told that he not only read the Scripture, he also explained the meaning to the people. Scripture says:

They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read (Nehemiah 8:8 NIV).

The New Living Translation translates the verse in this manner:

They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage (Nehemiah 8:8 NLT).

Reading the Scripture out loud to the believers would have reminded the Jewish people how they learned the Old Testament. The Holy Scripture was read out loud when the people gathered together. After it was read out loud, it was then explained to them.

The New Testament Letters Were Commanded To Be Read To Everyone In Worship Services

This same practice was carried over in New Testament times. The Apostles commanded that the New Testament letters were to be read out loud:

I call on you solemnly in the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters (1 Thessalonians 5:27 NET).

This was necessary at the early stages of the church because few, if any, individuals would possess even a small portion of Scripture. Consequently,

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to learn what Jesus and the apostles taught, the people had to listen to the Scripture being read out loud.

We learn something else from this. It assumes the believers could understand what they were hearing. Scripture was understandable to all.

We also find that the apostolic writings were used in public worship. The Apostle Paul commanded that the books were to be read to the believers. He gave Timothy the following commandment:

Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (1 Timothy 4:11-13 NIV).

The Apostle John wrote something similar. We read the following in the opening verses in the Book of Revelation:

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy aloud, and blessed are those who hear and obey the things written in it, because the time is near (Revelation 1:3 NET).

Since the New Testament Scriptures were to be read out loud to various congregations, it was necessary to realize exactly which of these writings were divinely given.

16. The Letters Were To Be Exchanged With Other Churches

Not only were the letters to be read to every believer in the church where the letter was sent, we find that the various letters were to be exchanged between the churches. Paul gave this command when he wrote to the church at Colosse:

And after you have read this letter, have it read to the church of Laodicea. In turn, read the letter from Laodicea as well (Colossians 4:16 NET).

This way, every believer, in every church, was to read them or hear them read.

17. The Book Of Revelation Was Sent Out To More Than One Church

In the Book of Revelation, there is the command to send that which was written to more than one congregation. In the first chapter of the Book of Revelation, we read the following:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, saying: "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches—to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea" (Revelation 1:10,11 NET).

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The truth that was given to the various churches was authoritative for all believers—unless otherwise stated.

18. Some Letters Were Sent To All Believers (Universal Letters)

While some of the letters were written to specific congregations for a specific purpose, other letters were addressed to all those who believed in Jesus. These are known as the universal letters. For example, James wrote to the twelve tribes:

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is written to Jewish Christians scattered among the nations. Greetings! (James 1:1 NLT).

James' letter was not directed at any specific church. Neither was it written to address any immediate problem that had risen.

In the same manner, Peter wrote the following to all the exiles:

From Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those temporarily residing abroad (in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia) who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father by being set apart by the Spirit for obedience and for sprinkling with Jesus Christ's blood. May grace and peace be yours in full measure! (1 Peter 1:1,2 NET).

Peter's letter was addressed to all the exiles. Consequently, it was not written to any one individual, any specific church, or to deal with any specific issue.

The universal letters, Hebrews, James, First and Second Peter, and Jude, would all fit into this category of letters that were specifically written to a wider audience.

19. Ephesians Was Possibly A Circular Letter

The Book of Ephesians, rather than being addressed to just one church, was possibly a circular letter. For one thing, the earliest manuscripts of this letter lack the words, "in Ephesus."

In addition, in a second century list of Paul's letters from the heretic Marcion, Ephesians is called the "Letter to the Laodiceans." This is further testimony that it was originally circulated to a number of churches.

However, this is not certain. There are a number of scholars who believe that the letter was originally addressed to the church in Ephesus and to it alone.

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20. **The Believers Were Warned Against Forgeries From Those Claiming To Be Apostles**

In his introduction, Luke mentioned that a number of writings were in circulation when he wrote his gospel. He said:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us (Luke 1:1 NIV).

Since the writings of the Apostles were authoritative for all believers, some took it upon themselves to forge their writings.

The New Testament writers warned the churches against forgeries. Paul wrote the following to the Thessalonians:

Now regarding the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered so as to be with him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, that you not be easily shaken from your composure or be disturbed by any kind of spirit or message or letter allegedly from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here (2 Thessalonians 2:1,2 NET).

It seems that false letters were already circulating at an early date. To combat this, every letter of Paul had his unique mark to guarantee its authenticity. He wrote:

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all (2 Thessalonians 3:17,18 NIV).

The Message puts it this way:

I, Paul, bid you good-bye in my own handwriting. I do this in all my letters, so examine my signature as proof that the letter is genuine. The incredible grace of our Master, Jesus Christ, be with all of you! (2 Thessalonians 3:17-18 MsgB).

Also, a well-known messenger carried each letter. This also helped guarantee the letters that were read were authentic.

21. **The Authority Of The Apostles And Prophets Was Carefully Examined**

The authority of the apostles was also examined. Paul made it clear that he had the proper credentials of an apostle:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who would examine me (1 Corinthians 9:1-3 NRSV).

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This is an important point to note. Those who claimed apostolic authority, such as Paul, were examined by the believers to see if this be true. Jesus commended the churches for examining those who claimed to be apostles. He said:

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands: “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false” (Revelation 2:1-2 NRSV).

When prophets would claim to speak in the name of the Lord, it was necessary to discern whether or not their words were true. Consequently, Paul wrote about a spiritual gift which had the ability to distinguish between the spirits. He said the following gift was given to the church.

And to another discernment of spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10 NET).

Paul said the prophets must testify to Christ through the Holy Spirit. He also wrote to the Corinthians:

Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3 NRSV).

John gave a specific test for one claiming to be a prophet—they must recognize Christ has come in the flesh:

This is the way to find out if they have the Spirit of God: If a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ became a human being, that person has the Spirit of God (1 John 4:2 NLT).

Therefore, the evidence is that the early church did not blindly follow anyone who claimed to be an apostle or a prophet.

There is also the fact that each of Paul's letters seemed to have contained his unique signature. It seems that he had a unique handwriting style which could not easily have been forged. This, of course, would have been a temporary criterion. Once copies of his letters were made, they were made without his unique signature. No original document with his handwriting has survived. Furthermore, no one today would be able to recognize his signature even if a document was found.

22. The New Testament Speaks Of The Completed Old Testament

Finally, we have the teaching of the New Testament about the existence of the Old Testament, or Old Covenant, Scriptures that was read by the Jews. We read about this in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. He said:

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But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside (2 Corinthians 3:14 NRSV).

If there was a written Old Testament that was already in existence, then certainly there would have been the expectation for a written New Testament. Since the words of Jesus carried God's divine authority, it would have been necessary for these words to be recorded for future generations.

The writer to the Hebrews contrasted the former revelation, found in the Old Testament, with the revelation found in Jesus Christ:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:1-3 NKJV).

The Message reads as follows:

Going through a long line of prophets, God has been addressing our ancestors in different ways for centuries. Recently he spoke to us directly through his Son. By his Son, God created the world in the beginning, and it will all belong to the Son at the end. This Son perfectly mirrors God, and is stamped with God's nature. He holds everything together by what he says—powerful words! After he finished the sacrifice for sins, the Son took his honored place high in the heavens right alongside God (Hebrews 1:1-3 MsgB).

The writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus Christ is God's final revelation to humanity—not merely that the final revelation came through Him. This is another indication of a need for a written New Testament for God has said all that He needs to say.

These Factors Set The Stage For A New Testament Canon

Consequently, we learn a number of things from the New Testament that set the stage for adding to the existing Old Testament Scripture. All of these factors began to create the need for a New Testament canon.

Summary To Question 2

What Do We Learn From The New Testament Itself About The Need For A New Testament Canon?

From the New Testament itself, we find there were a number of things that began to create the need for a New Testament canon of Scripture. First, the Old Testament ends with the expectation of more divine revelation—the Word of God to humanity was not complete.

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We also discover that the teachings of Jesus were authoritative the moment He gave them. Before He left the world, Jesus promised that He would send His disciples another teacher—the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God would perfectly remind them of all the things that Jesus said and did.

Through the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were to be given the same authority as Jesus. After Jesus died and rose from the dead His apostles spoke with this same authority as their Lord.

At first, their teachings about Jesus were delivered orally. There was a body of truth from the beginning known as the Apostles' doctrine or Apostles' teaching.

Eventually, they put these teachings of Jesus into writing. Their writings were received with the same authority as their words. These writings were then read out loud and circulated among the churches.

However, problems soon appeared. As the true message of Jesus went out to believers, a number of forgeries also appeared.

Steps were then taken to ensure that only the genuine writings were read and circulated among the churches. We also find the New Testament writers speaking of a completed Old Testament. This would have set the stage for a "New" Testament.

All of these factors created the need for additional Scripture—a New Testament canon which would have divine authority like the Old Testament canon.

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Question 3

Does The New Testament Ever Quote Itself As Authoritative Scripture?

Yes. On two separate occasions we find one part of the New Testament quoting another part of the New Testament as authoritative Scripture. On the first occasion, we have Peter recognizing Paul, while on the second occasion we find Paul quoting Luke.

1. Peter Recognizes Paul As Writing Scripture

Peter recognized the writings of the Apostle Paul as Holy Scripture. He wrote the following to the believers:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15,16 ESV).

This statement of Peter tells us several things:

First there were a number of Paul's letters that were circulating. Peter speaks of his "letters." While he does not give the exact number of these letters, they were circulating as a group.

Second, these writings of Paul were well-known by Peter and the other believers. The fact that he could speak of these letters to his audience in this particular way assumes that they were familiar with them.

Third, Peter placed these writings of Paul on the same level as the Old Testament Scripture. He used the Greek word *graphē* to refer to Paul's writings. This Greek word is used fifty-one times in the New Testament, and it refers to the Old Testament writings in every other occurrence.

Consequently, "Scripture" was a technical term that the New Testament used to refer to God's authoritative writings.

2. Paul Quotes The Gospel Of Luke As Scripture

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he quoted a passage from Luke and called it "Scripture." We read the following passage:

For the Scripture says, "Do not keep an ox from eating as it treads out the grain." And in another place, "Those who work deserve their pay!" (1 Timothy 5:18 NLT).

There are two verses that Paul quotes here when he cites Scripture. The first one quoted is from Deuteronomy 25:4.

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However, the second verse is a quotation of one of our Lord's statements recorded by Luke:

Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house (Luke 10:7 NRSV).

This saying of Jesus, variously translated, "those who work deserve their pay," or "the laborer deserves to be paid," is not found in the Old Testament—it is a unique saying of Jesus. In citing the phrase, Paul uses the exact same Greek words that Luke used.

Consequently, it seems that Paul knew of Luke's written gospel at this time and considered it Scripture. If true, then Paul quotes Luke's gospel on the same level as the writings of Moses. This implied equivalence between the two writings.

There is something else. On another occasion Paul quotes this same verse, Deuteronomy 25:4, and describes it as follows:

For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." Is it oxen God is concerned about? (1 Corinthians 9:9 NKJV).

Here, when writing to the Corinthians, Paul attributes this saying to the Law of Moses. When he quoted this Old Testament verse to Timothy, along with the other phrase, "the laborer is worthy of his wages" Paul attributed both of these phrases to "Scripture." This is another indication that he considered the writings of Luke to be sacred Scripture like the Law of Moses.

There is still more. This is a second instance of a New Testament writer using the technical term *graphie* when referring to another New Testament work.

This is significant because neither Paul nor Luke were among the Twelve Apostles. Yet the writings of both of them are called Scripture by other New Testament writers.

Thus, from these two passages, we have the letters of Paul, and the writings of Luke (Luke/Acts) considered Scripture.

Some Disagree That Paul Called Luke's Writing Scripture

We must note that there are those who do not believe Paul is calling Luke's writing Scripture. They see the phrase, "the Scripture says" as referring to the first quotation from Deuteronomy. The second statement, they say, is merely an explanation of the first statement, and not a citing of Luke's gospel as Scripture.

However, this does not seem to be the natural way of understanding the quotation. It seems much better to see this as Paul quoting Luke.

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There are some Bible students who contend that even if Paul is not directly quoting Luke's gospel, he is directly quoting the exact words of Jesus. This shows, that at an early date, the words of Jesus were given the same authority as the Old Testament Scripture.

However, since the word Scripture is used, it refers to something written. There is no example of oral tradition being called Scripture. The word Scripture, when used in the New Testament, always refers to something written.

3. There Was Early Acceptance Of The Idea Of A New Testament Canon

The evidence, therefore, is that very early in the history of the church the concept of a New Testament canon appeared. The believers were accepting new writings as Holy Scripture. These writings held absolute authority for them.

Finally, it also shows that more Scripture is to be expected. Additional writings were in the process of being made.

Thus, the sacred writings of the Old Testament will have additions in a "New" Testament. Each testament would have God's authority behind it.

Summary To Question 3 Does The New Testament Ever Quote Itself As Authoritative Scripture?

The New Testament is quoted twice as Scripture. Peter acknowledged the writings of Paul were considered to be Holy Scripture. Paul quoted a particular saying of Jesus from Luke's gospel and called it Scripture.

While there are some who dispute this second reference, it seems best to see it as a direct quotation of Jesus' words.

There are two things we can learn from this.

First, it shows that the idea of adding new Scripture, apart from the Old Testament, was already occurring in the early years of the church.

Second, it also tells us that Christians were expecting more Scripture to be added.

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Question 4

Does Each Book Of The New Testament Claim To Be The Authoritative Word Of God?

While not every New Testament book claims to be the Word of God, each book in the New Testament does contain some type of authoritative claim within its pages. The evidence is as follows.

1. The Evidence From The Four Gospels

Each of the four gospels gives claims of divine authority. We can see this as we examine their testimony.

Matthew

To begin with, Matthew records Old Testament prophecy being fulfilled in his book. For example, he says the following concerning Jesus' conception:

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us" (Matthew 1:22,23 NRSV).

Later, he also stated:

When he [Joseph] arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt: And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son (Matthew 2:14,15 KJV).

Still later, Matthew wrote the following:

Then what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be consoled, because they were no more (Matthew 2:17,18 CSB).

These passages are consistent with the idea that Matthew believed his writings carried divine authority. He cites the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture in the life and ministry of Jesus. This certainly implies divine authority.

Mark

Mark's work is about the "good news" of Jesus. We read the following words in the opening verse of his gospel:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1 KJV).

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Mark also cites the Old Testament prophets as predicting Jesus' coming to the world. He wrote the following explanation:

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" (Mark 1:2 NRSV).

Like Matthew, Mark writes about the life of Jesus with authority. He cites the fulfillment of certain Old Testament prophecies. Again, this implies divine authority.

Luke

Luke precisely stated the reason why he wrote his gospel—he wanted his readers to know the exact truth about Jesus. He wrote the following in his introduction:

Now many have undertaken to compile an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, like the accounts passed on to us by those who were eyewitnesses and servants of the word from the beginning. So it seemed good to me as well, because I have followed all things carefully from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know for certain the things you were taught (Luke 1:1-4 NIV).

Luke wanted to give an accurate portrayal of what occurred—he made it clear that his aim was to tell the truth about Jesus.

John

John wrote for the distinct purpose of causing people to believe in Jesus. He made the following statement as to his purpose for writing:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30,31 NRSV).

This makes it clear that John had a definite purpose in mind when he wrote. He wanted to create belief in Jesus as the genuine Messiah.

Therefore, from each of the four gospels, there is an implicit or explicit, claim of giving an accurate and authoritative portrait of Jesus.

2. The Testimony Of The Book Of Acts

The Book of Acts records what Jesus continued to do after His death, resurrection and ascension. Luke wrote:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving

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instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen (Acts 1:1,2 NIV).

Acts also records the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. For example, on the Day of Pentecost, it records the following take place:

Some, however, made fun of them [the apostles] and said, “They have had too much wine.” Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ‘Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel’ (Acts 2:13-16 NIV).

Acts, like the four gospels, records the divine authority given to Jesus and His apostles.

3. The Evidence From The Letters Of Paul

In each of Paul’s letters, we find some type of authoritative claim contained in them. The evidence for it is as follows:

Romans

To the Romans, Paul stated that the gospel which he preached was promised beforehand by God in the Old Testament Scripture:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 1:1-4 ESV).

He also wrote about “his gospel” —the gospel in which he preached:

On the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Romans 2:16 NRSV).

Paul ended his letter to the Romans by emphasizing that his calling was supernatural. He wrote of the gospel that was given to him to proclaim:

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith (Romans 16:25-26 NRSV).

Paul spoke of “my gospel.” The authority of Paul is clearly stated in this letter. He claimed to have a unique calling from God.

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First Corinthians

Paul told the Corinthians that when he came to Corinth, he spoke and taught with the power of God:

My conversation and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power (1 Corinthians 2:4 NET).

Paul also believed that he wrote with the mind of Jesus Christ. He contrasted the mind of the believer with the mind of the unbeliever when he wrote to the Corinthians:

But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:14-16 NKJV).

Not only did Paul claim to have the mind of Christ, he asserted his apostleship to the Corinthians. He wrote:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? (1 Corinthians 9:1 NIV).

To the Corinthians, he also wrote about the divine authority God had given him:

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37 ESV).

The New Revised Standard Version translates the verse as follows:

Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37 NRSV).

From these passages, it is obvious that Paul claimed to possess God’s authority in his speaking and his writing.

Second Corinthians

Paul also stressed his apostleship in his second letter to the Corinthians. He began his letter with the following statement:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia (2 Corinthians 1:1 NIV).

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His authority was clearly stated at the beginning of this letter. There was no doubt that he believed his writings were divinely inspired. Paul also said that there were those who described his letters as “weighty and forceful:”

I do not want to seem as though I am trying to terrify you with my letters, because some say, “His letters are weighty and forceful, but his physical presence is weak and his speech is of no account (2 Corinthians 10:10 NET)

In addition, Paul claimed that Christ speaks through him. He also wrote the following to the Corinthians:

Since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak toward you but is powerful among you (2 Corinthians 13:3 NET).

This is another indication of Paul’s God-given authority.

Galatians

Paul told the Galatians that his doctrine was received by revelation of Jesus Christ—it was not of human origin:

For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:12 ESV).

The New Revised Standard Version translates the verse as follows:

For I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:12 NRSV).

Again, we see Paul claiming divine authority. His message was from a divine source, not a human one.

Ephesians

To the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote of the unique calling that he received from God. He stated it as follows:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly (Ephesians 3:2,3 NIV).

Paul again gave testimony to his special calling. God had given this man a unique ministry to fulfill.

Philippians

Paul emphasized his consistent Christian lifestyle to the Philippians. He told them to imitate his own behavior:

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Be imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and watch carefully those who are living this way, just as you have us as an example (Philippians 3:17 NET).

Paul reemphasized this to the Philippians. He again told them to follow his pattern of behavior. We read the following:

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:9 NIV).

In all of this, we again find Paul asserting his apostolic authority.

Colossians

To the church at Colosse, Paul wrote of the stewardship, or responsibility, that he had been given by the Lord. He said:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints (Colossians 1:24-26 ESV).

The Colossians realized that Paul was given special authority by the Lord.

First Thessalonians

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that his words were the words that God gave him. He stated it in this way:

And so we too constantly thank God that when you received God's message that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human message, but as it truly is, God's message, that is at work among you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13 NET).

Paul's authority was such that he could command his letter to be read to them. He also wrote the following to the Thessalonians:

I call on you solemnly in the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters (1 Thessalonians 5:27 NET).

This is probably the first letter that Paul wrote to a church. Consequently, his authority as an apostle was clear from the beginning.

Second Thessalonians

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul stated that he wrote authoritatively about the future day of the Lord:

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Now regarding the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered so as to be with him, we ask you, brothers and sisters, that you not be easily shaken from your composure or be disturbed by any kind of spirit or message or letter allegedly from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not arrive until the rebellion comes and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction (2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 NET).

Paul's words were written with the authority of Jesus Christ. Again, he emphasized his unique calling that had been divinely given to him.

First Timothy

We also find claims of authority in the Book of First Timothy. The apostle Paul urged Timothy to teach the things that he had learned from Paul. He said the following:

These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity (1 Timothy 4:11,12 NRSV).

Paul could tell Timothy to imitate him in his behavior and then to be an example to others. Paul could say this because of the authority that he had been given.

Second Timothy

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul encouraged him to keep the sound teaching that he had learned from his writings:

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us (2 Timothy 1:13,14 NIV).

Paul's last words to Timothy were a command to continue to preach the word. We read the following in Second Timothy:

I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the message, be ready whether it is convenient or not, reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and instruction (2 Timothy 4:1-2 NET).

This is the last letter that Paul wrote before his death. He asserts his apostolic authority until the very end of his life. Therefore, we have no doubt whatsoever that his entire ministry had the Lord's authority behind it.

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Titus

Paul wrote to Titus about his right to encourage and rebuke people. He wrote the following commandment to him:

These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you (Titus 2:15 NIV).

Titus was told to exercise his authority. Paul believed that he had the authority to tell Titus to do this.

Philemon

Paul emphasized his right to command others to Philemon. He, however, appealed to Philemon on the basis of love:

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus (Philemon 8,9 NIV).

Therefore, we find that in each of Paul's letters, he makes claims about his authority as an Apostle. It is clear that he believed his writings were to be obeyed.

4. Other New Testament Writers

The other New Testament writers also make authoritative claims. The evidence for them can be seen as follows.

Hebrews

The writer to the Hebrews also claimed divine authority for his words. He urged his readers to do the following things:

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:7 NIV).

He concluded by saying:

I urge you, dear brothers and sisters, please listen carefully to what I have said in this brief letter (Hebrews 13:22 NLT).

Although we do not know the identity of the writer to the Hebrews, his divine authority is stressed in this letter.

James

James wrote as servant, or a slave, of Jesus Christ. He began the letter by saying:

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This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ (James 1:1 NLT).

The NIV translates the verse in this manner:

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings (James 1:1 NIV).

It is clear that his words were also given with the Lord's authority.

First Peter

Peter asserted his apostleship when he wrote his first letter. He began by saying the following:

This letter is from Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ. I am writing to God's chosen people who are living as foreigners in the lands of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, the province of Asia, and Bithynia. God the Father chose you long ago, and the Spirit has made you holy. As a result, you have obeyed Jesus Christ and are cleansed by his blood. May you have more and more of God's special favor and wonderful peace (1 Peter 1:1,2 NLT).

He also wrote about the purpose of his letter:

With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it (1 Peter 5:12 NIV).

Peter wrote with the authority of the Lord.

Second Peter

In his second letter, Peter also emphasized his apostolic position. He wrote:

Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours (2 Peter 1:1 NIV).

Peter wrote of the authority of the apostles. He compared their authority with that of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets:

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles (2 Peter 3:1,2 ESV).

As was true with his first letter, Peter again asserted his authority as an apostle.

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First John

In the letters of the Apostle John, we find that he claimed divine authority. He began his first letter as follows:

This is what we proclaim to you: what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and our hands have touched (concerning the word of life—and the life was revealed, and we have seen and testify and announce to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us) (1 John 1:1,2 NET).

He also wrote about the need to test the spirits. The believers were to determine which spirits came from God and which were did not:

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses Jesus as the Christ who has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God, and this is the spirit of the antichrist, that you have heard is coming, and now is already in the world (1 John 4:1-3 NET).

John believed that he had God's authority behind his writings:

Second John

In his second letter, John wrote a command for all believers. He stated it this way:

And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another (2 John 5 NIV).

Obviously, he felt he had the authority to do this. He gave a further command. It reads as follows:

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work (2 John 10,11 NIV).

Again, the writer, John, had the authority to issue commands.

Third John

In his third letter, John again asserted his authority. He wrote:

I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not acknowledge us. Therefore, if I come, I will call attention to the deeds he is doing—the bringing of unjustified charges against us with evil words! And not being content with that, he not only refuses to welcome the brothers himself, but hinders the people who

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want to do so and throws them out of the church! Dear friend, do not imitate what is bad but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does what is bad has not seen God. Demetrius has been testified to by all, even by the truth itself. We also testify to him, and you know that our testimony is true (3 John 9-12 NET).

John continued to write in an authoritative manner.

Jude

Jude spoke of a body of truth that Christians believed. He called it “the faith that was once and for all entrusted to the saints.” He said:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3 ESV).

Jude wrote with the authority of the Lord.

Revelation

More than any other writer of the New Testament, John, the author of the Book of Revelation, makes his authority clear—he claimed divine origin. The book begins as follows:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw (Revelation 1:1,2 ESV).

John also recorded the command the Lord gave him. He put it this way:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea (Revelation 1:10,11 ESV).

The readers of the Book of Revelation are commanded to hear what the Holy Spirit has to say to the churches:

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God (Revelation 2:7 NRSV).

John also claimed to be in the line of the prophets:

But he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!” (Revelation 22:9 NRSV)

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John closes his book with the following warning:

And I solemnly declare to everyone who hears the prophetic words of this book: If anyone adds anything to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. And if anyone removes any of the words of this prophetic book, God will remove that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book (Revelation 22:18.19 NLT).

John uses the term prophecy, or prophetic word, in the Old Testament sense—the word spoken from God. His claim to divine authority is clear.

They All Claim Or Imply Divine Authority

Therefore, we find each of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament claiming some type of divine authority. The writers either explicitly or implicitly express that they are not merely writing their own thoughts or words but are actually writing the words and thoughts of God.

The apostles considered themselves servants, or stewards of God's Word. Paul wrote the following to the Corinthians:

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries (1 Corinthians 4:1 NRSV)

In another place, he wrote:

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20 NKJV).

The apostles did not distinguish between their spoken teaching, and their written teaching—all of it carried the authority of Christ. Therefore, the unanimous testimony of the New Testament is that it is the authoritative record of the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus.

Summary To Question 4 Does Each Book Of The New Testament Claim To Be The Authoritative Word Of God?

Each of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament has some type of claim in it. Matthew claims to record fulfilled prophecy, Mark calls his work the "good news of Jesus Christ," Luke claimed to be recording the truth about Jesus. John claimed to be an eyewitness and faithful writer of the events of the life of Christ.

The Book of Acts continues to tell the story about Jesus after His ascension. In each of Paul's writings he asserts his authority as an apostle. Peter also claims apostolic authority in his two letters.

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The writer to the Hebrews issues commands to believers. James also gives commands to believers while Jude urges his readers to contend for the faith. The three letters of John have authoritative commands, as does the Book of Revelation which specifically claims to be divine revelation.

Consequently, each book of the New Testament has some type of truth claim connected to it. These writers believed they were recording God's truth.

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Question 5

What Happened After The Apostolic Era That Brought About The Need For A New Testament Canon?

While the New Testament gave witness of sacred writings that could be added as further Scripture, it was not until the middle of the second century that believers began to feel the need for an authoritative list of these sacred writings.

There were a number of historical forces that brought about the need for a New Testament canon—an authoritative list of writings. They include the following.

1. Oral Tradition Was Used Less And Less: The Need For Something Written Became More Important

There are strong reasons to believe that the disciples of Jesus would have written some things about Him immediately after His ascension into heaven. New believers needed to be taught and the apostles could not be everywhere.

However, while the Apostles were still alive, their living voice was preferred over written Scripture. Consequently, there was no immediate need for a fixed canon of Scripture. Even after the Apostles died there were many believers who had heard their teachings first-hand.

However, when that second generation of Christians began to die out, the need arose for a list of books that would be recognized as authoritative Scripture.

2. There Was The Problem With The Gnostics Who Had Their Own Scripture

One of the first threats to the Christian faith was Gnosticism. The Gnostics had their own Scriptures that rivaled the canonical books. It was important that their false doctrine did not infiltrate the church. Therefore, it had to be made clear which books were from the Apostles and which were not.

3. The Heretic Marcion Produced His Own Canon

There was also an attack on the genuine writings. In the second century, there was an anti-Semitic heretic named Marcion who constructed his own canon of Scripture.

He rejected the entire Old Testament and all of the New Testament writings apart from ten of Paul's letters and an altered version of the gospel of Luke. This caused the church to face the question of the extent of the canon.

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4. The Rise Of Montanism: A Movement That Claimed To Receive Divine Revelation

Montanism, named after its leader Montanus, arose in the mid-second century A.D. According to Montanus, the prophetic gift was to be permanent in the church. Montanus claimed to receive further revelation from the Lord and believed himself to be a New Testament prophet.

The fact that he claimed there could still be further revelation from God, after the time of the Apostles, caused the church to make certain there was a true standard to judge all teaching.

From the Scripture, it was found that even the New Testament prophets were subject to the authority of the apostles. Paul wrote:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent (1 Corinthians 14:29-30 NKJV).

Paul listed the gift, or office, of apostle before that of a prophet. He wrote:

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11 NKJV).

The church rejected the claim of Montanus that he could speak on the same level as the apostles—for the apostles alone had been granted Christ's authority. The faith had been once and for all delivered by the apostles of Christ and their associates. Nothing else was necessary.

Because the Montanists used the Book of Revelation extensively, the Orthodox Church in Syria overreacted by denying its canonical status.

Previously they had accepted its authority. The confusion caused by Montanism was another factor that brought about the need for a list of authoritative works.

5. The New Testament Was Translated Into Other Languages: Which Books Were To Be Translated?

By the year A.D. 170, two translations of the New Testament had been made—the Old Latin and the Syriac. Obviously, to make a translation of New Testament books from one language to another, it would have been necessary to know the limit of the sacred writings. It is necessary to know which books to translate.

6. There Was Persecution Of Believers: There Was A Need To Know Which Books To Protect

Persecution was also rampant. The worst persecution occurred in A.D. 303 when the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered that all sacred books be burned, the churches to be destroyed, and the believers to lose their civil rights.

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This was another factor that led to the need for an authoritative list of writings from Jesus' followers. Believers needed to know which writings to save from destruction.

7. The Edict Of Constantine To Produce Fifty Copies Of The Scripture

In A.D. 325 the Roman Emperor Constantine ordered fifty copies of the Scripture to be produced. Consequently, it was necessary to know the exact extent of the Scriptures in order to produce copies.

Unfortunately, we do not have any list of which books were used to make up the New Testament for these fifty copies.

8. The Popularity Of The Diatessaron: A Harmony Of The Four Gospels

The word "diatessaron" literally means "through the four." A man named Tatian composed a work in which he combined the four canonical gospels into one harmonious work.

Thus, the Diatessaron was a harmony of the four gospels. In the Syrian Church, this work actually took the place of the four canonical gospels for a time. Eventually the Syrian Church restored the four gospels to the canon. However, the fact that they were temporarily removed became another motivating factor in having a list of sacred writings.

9. The Change From The Scroll To The Codex

Another factor that made a collection of New Testament books easier was the move from scrolls to a codex. The codex was a book form. As writings began to be produced in the form of a codex rather than a scroll, it became easier to collect various writings under one cover.

There is something else—the people needed to know which books were to be put in the one cover!

Therefore, each of these nine factors brought about the need for a list of further written Scripture—a "new" Testament.

What Was The Relationship Between The Old And The New?

With a completed Old Testament canon, there arose the need to recognize a New Testament canon. The believers in Jesus had four possible responses with respect to the words of Jesus and the Old Testament.

First, they could have added the words of Jesus to the existing Old Testament.

Second, they could have ignored the authority of the Old Testament and displaced them with the words of Jesus.

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Third, they could have used the Old Testament alone as their authority.

Finally, they could have added a New Testament to complement that which had been revealed in the Old Testament. Based upon principles already found in the New Testament, this last option is what they decided to do.

Summary To Question 5

What Happened After The Apostolic Era That Brought About The Need For A New Testament Canon?

The need for an authoritative list of books that would testify to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ became apparent by the middle of the second century. A number of factors made this evident.

The first generation of Christians had all passed away and the second generation of Christians was in the process of dying out. The people had lost all contact with eyewitnesses of Jesus and His Apostles. Since the people could no longer hear from those who had heard Jesus and His apostles, a written testimony was necessary.

The Gnostics, one of the first enemies of Christianity, had their own set of sacred books. A clear choice between their writings and the authoritative writings was necessary.

There was also the appearance of a canon by the heretic Marcion. He created his own perverted canon. The church had to respond to his false teaching about the canon.

The Montanists with their belief that God was still divinely inspiring believers was another factor for the need for an authoritative list of books.

Bible translation was another factor. Because Jesus commanded His disciples to preach the gospel to the entire world, the Greek New Testament was translated into other languages. However, a canon of Scripture would be necessary before the translation process could begin.

Persecution was another important motivation. The possession of Scripture was outlawed under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. The penalty could include death. This caused the believers to make certain which books were holy and which were not.

When the Roman Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity as the state religion, he ordered fifty copies of the Scripture to be made.

Consequently, it had to be determined just exactly what works constituted Scripture.

There is also the fact that the Diatessaron temporarily replaced the Four Gospels in the Syrian Church by creating a harmony of the four gospels. This was another factor that created the need of an authoritative list of writings.

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There was also the change of the form in which the writings were made. Previously all written documents were on single scrolls. With the popularity of the codex, or book form, all the writings could be placed into one bound book. Thus, it is important to know what books to place within the one bound volume.

All of these factors brought about the need for a New Testament canon of Scripture.

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Question 6

What Happened Historically To Cause The Twenty-Seven Books Of The New Testament To Be Recognized As Scripture?

The books that make up the New Testament canon of Scripture were used authoritatively by the church from the very beginning. However, like the Old Testament, their collection, and distinction from other written documents, was a gradual and continuous process that took a couple of centuries to complete.

In the year A.D. 367, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, as was his custom, sent out an Easter letter to the churches in Egypt. In this particular letter, he specified the twenty-seven books that make up the present New Testament as the only sacred books that were to be recognized as part of a “New” Testament canon.

As far as we know, this is the first formal recognition of these specific books as the divinely inspired New Testament Scripture. This brings up a number of important questions.

What was the process that led the church to come to this understanding? How did we get from the time when the Apostles wrote the New Testament books to the recognition by Athanasius? What do we know how the historical forces that led to the formation and acceptance of the New Testament canon? A number of important observations need to be made.

We Can Divide The Developments Into Four General Periods

First, for convenience sake, we can place the development of the New Testament canon in four basic periods. They are as follows: the Apostolic Era (A.D. 30-100); the second generation of Christians (A.D. 100-150); the move from the oral to written Word and the period of examination (A.D. 150-350); and the time of formal recognition (A.D. 350-397).

While these categories overlap, they do provide a general framework to understand how the books of the New Testament developed from originally being written to their formal recognition by the church.

Period 1: The Apostolic Era (A.D. 30-100)

The first period we want to examine is the time when the Apostles of Christ, as well as other eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry, were still living. This would be from approximately from A.D. 30-100.

The New Testament Had Its Origin In Jesus Christ

The New Testament is all about Jesus Christ; He is the promised Messiah and the Savior of the world. The entire story centers on him. Once He ascended into heaven after His resurrection, His twelve disciples, and those whom He specially chose, faithfully passed on the things that Jesus said

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and did. They were the authoritative interpreters of His message and ministry.

The Apostles Doctrine Was Taught

The believers in the early church were taught the doctrine of the Apostles. The doctrine, or teaching, of the Apostles had the authority of the Lord Jesus behind it. The Bible says the early church learned the doctrine of the apostles from the very beginning. The Book of Acts explains it this way:

And they [the believers] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42 ESV).

The Apostle Paul commanded Timothy to hold on to the sound teachings of Jesus. He wrote the following:

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you (2 Timothy 1:13,14 ESV).

Paul said that authoritative tradition was to be passed on to others. He also wrote to Timothy:

And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2 ESV).

The New English Translation renders this verse as follows:

And what you heard me say in the presence of many others as witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be competent to teach others as well (2 Timothy 2:2 NET).

At the beginning, this tradition was passed on by word of mouth.

However, soon after Jesus' ascension these traditions about Him were committed to writing. These writings were copied, recopied, read out loud, circulated, and exchanged between churches. The result was the New Testament. The twenty-seven books that make up the New Testament were written during a period of approximately sixty years (A.D. 40-96).

The Authoritative Writings Of Paul Were Collected Early

The New Testament writings were collected at a relatively early date. We know that there was an early collection of Paul's writings. Peter wrote:

And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as also our dear brother Paul wrote to you, according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of these things in all his letters. Some things in these letters are hard to understand, things the ignorant and unstable twist to their

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own destruction, as they also do to the rest of the scriptures (2 Peter 3:15,16 NET).

Peter does not tell us exactly how many letters of Paul were known and circulated. However, what this does tell us is that before Peter's death, some of the letters of Paul circulated as a group.

There is also an early existing Greek manuscript that has a collection of Paul's letters. This manuscript is known as P⁴⁶. It contains eight of Paul's letters plus the Book of Hebrews. It has been recently argued that this manuscript should be dated in the late first century; that is, before A.D. 100. If this dating be correct, it would give further evidence of the early authority that Paul's writings had in the church.

Even if it is not to be dated in the first century, this collection of Paul's letters is still an early testimony to the authority his writings.

What we do know for certain, is that the writings of Paul were circulating as a unit during the time the New Testament was still being written.

The Four Gospels Were Soon Brought Together

At first, the four gospels were circulating as independent writings among believers. However, by the beginning of the second century, they were brought together and began to be circulated as a unit. This demonstrates the acceptance of these, and only these works, as the authoritative explanation of the life of Jesus Christ.

There Was A Distinction Between Authoritative And Non-Authoritative Writings

Even at an early date, there was already a distinction being made between the authoritative writings of the apostles and their associates, and the writings of others who did not possess Jesus' unique authority.

We read about this in the Book of Revelation:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to these words, God will add to that person the disasters written about in this book. And if anyone takes away from the words of this book of prophecy, God will take away that one's share of the tree of life and of the holy city, which are written about in this book (Revelation 22:18,19 NCV).

Consequently, the idea of authoritative, versus non-authoritative, "New" Testament writings was made at an early date.

The Testimony Of Clement Of Rome

The earliest written work outside of the New Testament, that mentions some of the New Testament writings, is the work of Clement (A.D. 95). He was a contemporary with the Apostles.

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Clement was part of a group of writers known as the “Apostolic Fathers.” Each of them had some personal knowledge of Jesus’ apostles, but were not part of that group.

In fact, Clement is mentioned by name by the Apostle Paul. We read the following in Philippians:

Yes, I say also to you, true companion, help them. They have struggled together in the gospel ministry along with me and Clement and my other coworkers, whose names are in the book of life (Philippians 4:3 NET).

In a letter that Clement wrote to the church at Corinth, he refers to a number of Paul’s writings—Ephesians, Romans, First Corinthians, First Timothy, and Titus. Clement also cites the Book of Hebrews, and First Peter.

In addition, Clement quotes parts of verses that are found in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. It is not certain that he is citing the written text of the gospels, or merely quoting these sayings of the Lord from memory.

While he refers to the Old Testament as “Scripture,” he does not call any New Testament writings by that specific term. However, he does cite them in such a way as to recognize their authority.

It is clear that the words of Jesus are at least as authoritative as the Old Testament prophets.

What is also clear from Clements own writings is that they do not carry the same authority as the writings of the apostles. He realized the distinction between his words and those of Jesus and the apostles.

Summary To Period 1: There Was No Pressing Need For A Canon

The believers in Jesus shared the same sacred Scripture with the Jews—the Old Testament. However, the coming of Christ into the world made a new Scripture necessary—a set of writings that would testify to Him.

Thus, in this first period the New Testament documents were written, copied, and circulated among the people of God. The spoken and written words of the apostles were considered as the authoritative words of Christ. The letters of Paul, as well as the four gospels, circulated as units.

Consequently, they held absolute authority. The concept of authoritative writings for a “New” Testament was already present. However, since eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus were still alive, no authoritative canon of Scripture was absolutely necessary.

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Period 2: The Second Generation Of Christians (A.D. 100-150)

In the early years of the church, there was no New Testament canon of Scripture. While authoritative documents were written and circulated, as far as we know, no collection of these documents had been made. Authority was in the living Apostles and their doctrine of Jesus Christ.

After the Apostles died, their teachings were held as having the highest authority. The written documents became more important as time went on.

However, the second generation of Christians seemed to prefer the oral testimony to the written as long as there were living witnesses to the teachings of the apostles. A number of important things occurred during this fifty-year period. They include the following.

The Writings Of Those Who Came After The Apostles Were Not Uniquely Authoritative

The second generation of Christians is known as the “Apostolic Fathers.” It is clear that the writings of these men, who lived after the time of the apostles, did not have the same authority as those whom Jesus personally chose. It was only the apostles who were chosen and commissioned by Jesus. Since those who came after the apostles were not eyewitnesses to the events in Jesus’ life, and were not given His unique authority, they can add nothing to God’s revelation to humanity.

In fact, the Apostolic Fathers made a distinction between their writings and those of the apostles. They recognized that their writings were not authoritative in the same sense as the writings of Jesus’ apostles. Consequently, they looked back upon that which was spoken or written by these men.

This is a further indication that believers did not establish the canon of Scripture but merely recognized the words of those whom God divinely appointed to speak and write His Word. It was the authority of Jesus Christ which revealed the extent of the canon. We can consider the following evidence from this period.

The Testimony Of Ignatius Of Antioch

Ignatius of Antioch was also one of the Apostolic Fathers. Like Clement, he recognized the authority of Jesus and the apostles.

In the year A.D. 115, Ignatius wrote seven letters on his way to being thrown to the lions. In his letters, Ignatius made the distinction between his writings, and those of the apostles. In his letter to the Romans, he made the following comparison between himself and Peter and Paul. He wrote:

I do not enjoin you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am a convict; they were free, but I am a slave to this very hour (Ignatius, Letter to the Romans, 4.3).

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Ignatius also uses the phrase “It is written” as well as the word “Scripture” in referring to a written gospel. He also emphasizes that Jesus Christ is the ultimate authority. Indeed, His authority is greater than the Old Testament.

In his writings, Ignatius acknowledged a number of New Testament books yet he never considered his own writings to have any divine authority. He realized that there was a definite boundary between the time of the apostles and afterward.

Second Clement

The written gospel is also referred to as Scripture in a work known as Second Clement, or the Second Letter of Clement. This document, dated anywhere from A.D. 100 to A.D. 150, is not the work of the biblical Clement—the author is not known. This document is actually the contents of a sermon.

In this sermon the gospel writings are again referred to as Scripture. Like the other early writings that have come down to us, the words of Jesus and the apostles are considered to be as least as authoritative as the Old Testament Scripture.

The Letter Of Barnabas

The letter of Barnabas was composed about A.D. 130. Although attributed to Barnabas, the traveling companion of Paul, it was not written by him. It is usually assumed to have been written about the middle of the second century.

In this work, (4:14) the formula “it is written” is used in reference to the New Testament where Barnabas cites Matthew 22:14. Again, this may be an indication of its view of the authority of the New Testament. However, his work is not much help in understanding the extent of the New Testament canon.

The Testimony Of Polycarp

Polycarp was another of the “Apostolic Fathers.” He was a personal disciple of the apostle John. In his letter to the Philippians he combined an Old Testament reference, Psalm 4:4, and a New Testament quotation — Ephesians 4:26.

He introduced it with the phrase, “as it is said in the Scripture.” This is found in his letter to the Philippians 12:4.

This seems to indicate that Polycarp considered Paul’s writings on the same level as the Old Testament—divinely authoritative. If this is the case, then we have another early witness to Paul’s authority.

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A Possible Early Witness To The New Testament: The Gospel Of Truth

The earliest possible reference we have for the New Testament canon of Scripture comes from a work called the Gospel of Truth (A.D. 140-145). A man named Valentinus probably wrote this work in the city of Rome. The writer is well-acquainted with the four gospels, the letters of Paul, Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation. He may also have been aware of the Book of Acts, 1 Peter and 1 John, and perhaps other New Testament books. He cites these writings as authoritative Scripture. His seems to be the earliest known witness to a “New” Testament.

The Gospel of Truth seems to show that before the middle of the second century, a collection of New Testament writings was known in Rome and was accepted as authoritative. These writings are virtually identical with our New Testament. This evidence alone gives us the New Testament in the middle of the first half of the second century.

The Heretic Marcion Produced An Alternative Canon

Another reason why an authoritative canon had to be universally acknowledged was because of the work of the heretic Marcion. He created his own canon during this period. Marcion accepted only the Gospel of Luke (minus the first two chapters) and ten of Paul’s letters. In his list of Paul’s letters, he called the letter to the Ephesians, “to the Laodiceans.” Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and anything in the New Testament that he considered to be “too Jewish.” His Scripture consisted of what he called the gospel and the apostle.

It is popular in some circles to assume that the church created the canon in response to Marcion. However, this is certainly not the case. His heretical canon was a reaction to the canon the church already received and accepted. The church was not reacting to him—he was reacting to the church! Paul’s letters were circulating as an authoritative collection and were considered to be Scripture during his own lifetime. The four gospels also circulated as a unit at an early date.

Thus, any list or canon that Marcion would have created would have been in response to the authoritative writings about Jesus—namely the four gospels, and the authoritative explanation of Jesus’ ministry, Paul.

Summary To Period 2: No Formal Canon Was Made At This Time In History

The New Testament documents became more widely known during this period. They were cited as authoritative by Christians. In addition, we find that the writings of other Christians during this period were not assumed to be of the same weight as the writings of the apostles. While these other writings could be useful and edifying, they were not the Word of God. Only the apostolic writings carried this unique authority of Christ.

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Letters from such people as Ignatius, Polycarp and Clement lack divine authority and fail to add to God's revelation. However, the early church, at this time, made no formal establishment of a new canon of Scripture neither did they speak of a canon. They did not seem concerned about the issue. Various churches had portions of the New Testament writings and this seemed to be satisfactory to them.

Period 3: The Move From The Oral To Written Word And The Time Of Examination (A.D. 150-350)

During the next period, the church moved away from the oral tradition to the written Scripture. There were no longer any living witnesses to the words of the Apostles.

The writings were now the only authoritative source of teaching about Jesus Christ. These writings began to be closely examined.

Some of the important events that occurred during this period include the following.

The Term New Testament Is First Used To Describe The Sacred Writings

By the year A.D. 170, at the latest, the concept of New Testament Scripture was firmly established among believers. The contents that were undisputed include the following writings: the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, 1 Peter, and 1 John. There were still some questions regarding the authority of the other writings that would eventually make up the New Testament. These issues would be settled later.

Independent of each other, and writing at about the same time, two men, Tertullian of Carthage writing in Latin, and Clement of Alexandria writing in Greek, made the first clear uses of the term "New Testament" to refer to the written documents that came from Jesus' apostles.

This occurred in approximately A.D. 200. Some people have argued for an earlier use of the term New Testament by an unknown writer in the year A.D. 190. However, this reference has been disputed.

There Were Early Translations Into Other Languages

The great majority of the New Testament was immediately and universally recognized by all believers. This can be demonstrated by the earliest translations of these sacred books. By the year A.D. 170, two translations of the New Testament had been made—the Old Latin and the Syriac Peshitta.

The Old Latin reflected the views of the Western Church while the Syriac Peshitta reflected the Eastern Church. From these two translations we find that nineteen of the twenty-seven New Testament books are found in both of these translations.

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The Syriac Peshitta included all of the present books of the New Testament except 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation while the Old Latin New Testament contains every book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter.

The books omitted in the Peshitta were originally sent to destinations in the Western part of the Roman Empire. This explains their omission in the Eastern part of the empire. Likewise, the writings omitted from the Old Latin were originally sent to the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

When the two lists are put together, twenty-six of the present twenty-seven New Testament books are found. Only Second Peter is missing. Eventually, the churches in the East and the West accepted all of these books, as well as Second Peter. Therefore, less than one hundred years after the New Testament was completed, the various books were translated and circulating into other languages.

The Muratorian Fragment Is Compiled During This Period

The Muratorian Fragment contains the earliest known list of New Testament writings. This document receives its name from the man who published the text of this list in the year 1740—Italian historian Ludwig Muratori. He discovered an eighth century Latin manuscript that contained a canonical list that is usually dated between A.D. 170 and 200.

The books of the New Testament are not only named, a number of observations are made about each book.

This list included all the New Testament books except Hebrews, James, and one letter of John. The books in the list correspond with the Old Latin translation of the New Testament. The list distinguishes between which books should be used in public worship and which should only be read in private study. This helps us understand the types of distinctions that were used at the time.

The Work Of Justin Martyr (Died A.D. 165)

Justin Martyr was an early apologist or defender of the Christian faith. In fact, he is the earliest Christian writer who did not have any personal contact with any of the apostles. He cites each of the four gospels as authoritative which he called the “memoirs of the apostles.” He calls the Gospel of Mark “Peter’s memoirs.”

Interestingly, while he cites Luke, he makes it clear that Luke was not one of the apostles. The only other New Testament book he cited as having authority was the Book of Revelation.

Justin described how the worship services functioned during this time in history. He said that each Sunday a selection was read from the gospels as well as from the writings of the prophets—this would be the Old Testament prophets. Justin viewed the gospels, at the very least, an equal level with the Old Testament prophets insofar as they testified to Jesus.

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The Testimony Of Irenaeus (A.D. 185)

Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, was associated with Bishop Pothinius who had personal acquaintance with the first generation of Christians. Therefore, he had a direct link to the apostles. Irenaeus was the main spokesman of the church against the false teachings of Gnosticism.

The Gnostics claimed that they had correctly preserved the teachings of the apostles—the church had not. Therefore, the church needed to respond to the Gnostic claims. Scripture played a major role in the response of Irenaeus to the Gnostics. He acknowledged twenty-two books of the New Testament in his various writings.

The Diatessaron Of Tatian

Tatian was a disciple of Polycarp who himself was a disciple of the Apostle John. Tatian made a harmony of the four gospels called the “Diatessaron.” This means, “through the four.” The four gospels, (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) served as a basis for his harmony. For a short period of time, the Syrian church actually replaced the four canonical gospels with Tatian’s Diatessaron.

The Writings Of Hippolytus (A.D. 170-235)

The writings of the early church father Hippolytus recognized twenty-two books of the New Testament as having divine authority. He cited the majority of the books. He placed these writings on the same level of authority as the books of the Old Testament.

There was still some question about Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. While Hippolytus quotes from such works as the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, and the Letter of Barnabas, he does not consider them to be Scripture.

The Writings Of Cyril Of Jerusalem

Around the year A.D. 315-316, Cyril of Jerusalem spoke of “the divinely authoritative Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments.” He listed the twenty-two books of the Hebrew canon, and twenty-six of the twenty-seven New Testament books, only omitting Revelation. He said

Learn also diligently, and from the Church, what are the books of the Old Testament, and what are those of the New. And, pray, read none of the apocryphal writings (Cyril, *Of The Divine Scripture*).

Cyril recognized a canon of Scripture which included an Old and a New Testament.

The Writings Of Eusebius (A.D. 270-340)

Eusebius of Caesarea is an important witness to the New Testament canon. He divided the writings that claimed some type of biblical authority into

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four categories. The first category was the books that were accepted by all. This list contained most of the twenty-seven books of the present New Testament Scripture.

The second category consisted of books that were disputed by some. The New Testament books of James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude were in this list.

The third list was of books rejected by the church as spurious. The books in this category included the letter of Barnabas, the Acts of Paul, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Gospel of the Hebrews. The church considered these books as non-authoritative.

The final category consisted of heretical books. These were books that Eusebius encouraged others not to read because the teachings were at odds with that of the Apostles. Interestingly, he has the Book of Revelation in both the accepted and rejected categories. At that time, there was divided opinion about it.

It was during the time of Eusebius that the Roman Empire became “Christianized.” Eusebius informs us that Emperor Constantine ordered fifty copies of the Scriptures to be produced by the best of scribes. To produce copies of authoritative Scripture there obviously has to be something to copy from.

Unfortunately, Eusebius gives us no details of which books were placed in these copies as part of the New Testament. All fifty copies that were produced have seemingly been lost.

Summary To Period 3: The New Testament Begins To Be Recognized And Translated But There Is No Exact Record As To When These Books Were First Collected

During this period the New Testament documents were recognized as Scripture and began to be translated into other languages. Commentaries on the New Testament books were also written during this time.

It was during this era that the New Testament documents were separated from other works. The books of the New Testament were acknowledged as being the only authoritative works about the life and ministry of Jesus. There were still some questions around the status of certain books, but there was a general consensus concerning the great majority of the writings.

It was also during this period that Christianity went from a persecuted faith to the official religion of the Roman Empire. Fifty copies of Holy Scripture were made at the direct order of the Roman Emperor Constantine.

We have no record that exists that tells us as to when one particular church collected all twenty-seven books that make up the present New Testament. Any attempt to specify the first time, or the first place, where all the books were gathered together would only be speculation. Therefore, we can only estimate when the books were collected.

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This period was characterized by the churches separating the Scripture from other writings. Christianity had now become accepted in the Roman Empire and the production of Scripture was now sanctioned by the government. This being the case, it was crucial to know which books constituted Scripture and which did not.

Period 4: The Time Of Formal Recognition Of The New Testament (A.D. 350-397)

It was during this period that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament began to be recognized by the church. The consensus was basically the result of other discussions that were taking place.

Questions relating to the Trinity, as well as to the exact nature of Jesus Christ, were discussed among Christian leaders. The church was attempting to define what orthodox doctrine was and what was not. To do so, there had to be a consensus of opinion as to which writings could be cited for the support of orthodox doctrine.

Again, we emphasize that these councils did not create the canon of Scripture but rather formally recognized what the church had believed for some time. No single council or person in authority was responsible for collecting these works and then pronouncing them authoritative. This important point needs to be stressed.

We find the following testimony to the New Testament canon by different people as well as different church councils.

The Council, Or Synod, Of Laodicea

In approximately A.D. 363, a council, or synod, of about thirty church leaders convened in Laodicea. Among the statements that came out of the council, was the order that only certain books were to be read in the churches.

This included the Old Testament and twenty-six books of the New Testament. No other books were to be read to believers. The only New Testament book missing from their list was the Book of Revelation.

The Easter Letter Of Athanasius In A.D 367

It had been a custom for the Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt to send out a yearly circular letter to the churches in Egypt informing them on the date of Easter. The letter could also address other concerns of the church.

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, sent out some forty-five letters in his long and distinguished career. What is significant for our study is the Easter letter that he sent out in the year A.D. 367. In this particular Easter letter, Athanasius acknowledged that the present twenty-seven books of the New Testament were the only authoritative writings that God had given in the New Testament era. These writings, combined with the Old Testament, made up God's Word to humanity.

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This is the first time, which we are aware of, where the twenty-seven present New Testament books were listed together as God's authoritative "New" Testament. However, as we have plainly seen, this does not mean it was the first time the church recognized a canon of Scripture existed.

Jerome

The Bible translator and scholar Jerome produced an authorized revision of the Old Latin. Jerome also testified to the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as the only divinely authoritative Scripture.

When Jerome published the twenty-seven books in his Latin Vulgate edition, it basically settled the issue of the New Testament canon in the Western part of the Roman Empire.

The Testimony Of St. Augustine

Saint Augustine was probably the greatest theologian in the early church after the time of the apostles. He also recognized only the present twenty-seven books of the New Testament as sacred Scripture. His testimony, along with that of Jerome, carried great weight in the early church.

The Council Of Hippo

The Council of Hippo (A.D. 393) was a local church council. It recognized the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as Holy Scripture. This council was influenced by the teachings of St. Augustine.

The Council Of Carthage

The Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) affirmed that the twenty-seven canonical books of the New Testament were to be the only books to be read in the churches as part of an authoritative "New" Testament. It is important to note that there is no indication that any of the church leaders at that time, Athanasius, Jerome, or Augustine, or these councils at Hippo and Carthage, acted in an arbitrary manner. They merely acknowledged the general consensus of belief with regard to the books that had long been considered to be Holy Scripture. These writings had been in use from the beginning and had been always considered to be authoritative by believers.

The Situation Was Less Stable In The Eastern Part Of The Empire

From the time of Athanasius, the canon was basically stable in the Western part of the Roman Empire. The situation in Eastern Christianity was somewhat different. The canon in the East was not as stable as in the West.

The fourth century Syrian fathers omitted the universal letters and the Book of Revelation. The Book of Hebrews was accepted because it was assumed that Paul wrote it.

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All But Seven Writings Were Recognized Early

Therefore, when we look at all the evidence, we find that the concept of a completed New Testament was formulated early in the history of the church. By the end of the second century, all but seven books (Hebrews, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, James, and Revelation) were recognized as apostolic.

By the end of the fourth century all twenty-seven books in our present canon were recognized by all the churches of the West.

Summary To Period 4 The Canon Was Formally Recognized

During this last period, the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were formally recognized by the church. With a few exceptions, there has been no real questioning of the extent of the canon by those who have genuinely believed in Jesus Christ.

This briefly summarizes the historical process that took place after the New Testament era toward the recognition of a “New Testament” canon of Scripture.

Summary To Question 6

What Happened Historically To Cause The Twenty-Seven Books Of The New Testament To Be Recognized As Scripture?

It is helpful if we have some idea of the historical process that led to the recognition of the New Testament canon as Holy Scripture. We can place this early history of the New Testament canon into four basic periods.

First, there was the apostolic era when the New Testament writings were composed. The documents were written, circulated, read out loud, studied, and cited as authoritative. However, while the apostles were still alive their living authority was preferred to the writings. The second generation of believers cited the writings of the Apostles as authoritative. Yet during this time there were people still living that had heard the apostles firsthand.

During the next period there was the move from the oral to written testimony. All of those who had heard the apostles were now dead. The writings were carefully examined during this period. The need became more and more apparent of some way to separate the authoritative books from other writings. The final period saw the recognition of the twenty-seven books by both individuals and councils. While the extent of the canon was basically fixed in the West from this time forward, the church in the East was slower in their recognition.

This briefly sums up the history of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and their recognition after the time of the apostles.

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Question 7

Why Did It Take Three Hundred Years For The First New Testament List To Be Drawn Up?

The twenty-seven books of the New Testament were completed before the end of the first century A.D. These particular books, and these books only, were accepted as authoritative Scripture by believers from the moment they were written. The four gospels and Paul's letters circulated as units from the early days of the church.

If this is the case, then why was it not until the year A.D. 367 that we have the first formal list of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament? Why did it take so long for the entire church to recognize these books as divinely given if they were immediately recognized when first written?

There are a number of observations that we can make as to why the entire twenty-seven New Testament documents took several centuries to be accepted by the entire church. They are as follows:

1. At An Early-Stage Oral Tradition Took Precedence Over Written Works

First, in the early years of the church, the oral tradition was given precedence over the written tradition. The people were probably more interested in the actual words of the Apostles than their writings.

However, this is not to say that the writings of the apostles were considered anything less than authoritative Scripture—they were considered divine.

Yet, while the apostles of Christ were still alive, and continued to speak face-to-face with believers, their personal appearances would have been preferred over their written testimony.

We find some examples in the New Testament where the writer expressed his desire to be face to face with the recipients of his letter. For example, John wrote:

Well, I have much more to say to you, but I don't want to say it in a letter. For I hope to visit you soon and to talk with you face to face. Then our joy will be complete (2 John 12 NLT).

John wanted to have a face-to-face meeting with the believers rather than putting these things that he had to say into writing.

The apostle Paul wrote something similar to the Galatians. He expressed his desire to be with them in person:

I wish I could be with you now and change my tone of voice, because I am perplexed about you (Galatians 4:20 NET).

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The writer to the Hebrews also expressed the desire to visit those to whom he had written. He wrote the following:

I especially ask you to pray that I may be restored to you very soon. . . . Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, bear with my message of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you briefly. You should know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he comes soon, he will be with me when I see you (Hebrews 13:19, 22, 23 NET).

Therefore, it seems that the oral testimony was preferred to the written testimony while the apostles were still alive. The immediate need for a canon of Scripture was not felt.

2. There Were Long Distances Between The Various Destinations Where The New Testament Documents Were Sent

There was also the problem of distance. The distances between the various churches in the Roman Empire made for slow communication. It took some time to verify exactly which writings were authoritative and which were not.

This would surely be the case for some of the smaller letters such as Second John, Third John, and Jude. The believers wanted to be certain that they were reading, copying, and circulating the authoritative writings.

3. There Was No Center Of Authority Where Decisions Were Made

In addition, there was no center of authority where decisions were made about issues such as these. Unlike the Jews and the Old Testament Scriptures, the church was not centered in one geographical area. This would have made a consensus of opinion as to which books belonged in Scripture slower to appear. These three factors would have slowed down the process of any consensus from believers of a written New Testament canon.

There Was Remarkable Unity Among Believers

In the end, there was remarkable unity among believers as to the identity of the sacred writings that would make up the New Testament. It is a fact of history that these twenty-seven books, and only these twenty-seven books, have been recognized by the church from the beginning to be God's Holy Word—the New Testament Scripture.

Consequently, it was not some organization that declared which books belonged in Scripture, but rather the divinely inspired books seemingly selected themselves.

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Summary To Question 7

Why Did It Take Three Hundred Years

For The First New Testament List To Be Drawn Up?

While it is often charged that it took the church some three hundred years to recognize the New Testament canon this is simply not the case. The books were recognized immediately as authoritative.

Reasons for the slow recognition of the canon by the entire church include the preference of living witnesses during the apostolic age and the generation that followed, the long distances between the destinations the letters were sent, and the fact that there was no center of authority where decisions were made.

During this entire process, there was remarkable unity among believers.

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Question 8

What Are Some Of The Differences Between The Recognition Of The Old Testament Canon And The Recognition Of The New Testament Canon?

While both the Old Testament and the New Testament are the Word of God, their history of canonization is quite different. The New Testament canon was unlike the canon of the Old Testament in a number of important respects. They include the following.

1. The New Testament Books Were Written In A Shorter Period Of Time

To begin with, the Old Testament was composed over a one-thousand-year period by authors, for the most part, who did not know each other.

On the other hand, the New Testament was composed in a relatively short period of time. Christ gave unique authority to His apostles. They, and their immediate associates, were the only ones who could compose a book that would have His authority behind it.

Therefore, any books in the New Testament period that could be acknowledged as part of the canon could only have come from the apostolic era. No one, after the time of the apostles, had any right to add to their writings or to take away from them. This limited the potential writings that could be considered divinely authoritative.

2. There Was No Authoritative Center For New Testament Believers

There was no central place where all the books were collected or preserved. In the Old Testament period, the books were first kept in the tabernacle, and later in the official archive in the temple in Jerusalem.

Christianity, on the other hand, was a missionary religion. Jesus told His followers to go out to the entire world and preach the good news. There was no single place where authoritative decisions were made, or where the sacred documents were kept.

3. The Writings Of The New Testament Had Different Destinations

The books of the Old Testament were written to the people of the nation Israel. They lived in a limited geographic area.

In contrast, the New Testament books were written to geographic destinations that were widely separated from one another. For example, Peter directed his letter to the people living in eastern Asia while John wrote to those in western Asia. Paul's letter to Rome went to Europe.

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Consequently, no single church, or groups of churches, would immediately possess all the twenty-seven New Testament books.

4. Most Of The Books Of The New Testament Were Written To Non-Jews

While all the books of the Old Testament were written by Hebrews, and addressed to the nation Israel, many of the New Testament books were written to Gentiles (non-Jews). Paul's letters were written to churches that mainly had Gentile members. These Gentiles would have had little, or no, familiarity with the Jews and their customs.

5. Some Of The New Testament Letters Were Written To Individuals

The Old Testament books were addressed to Israel as a nation. However, the New Testament books had a number of different people in mind. Some were addressed to individuals while some were written to specific Gentile congregations.

6. It Took A Long-Time For The Acceptance Of The Entire New Testament

Because of these factors, it took a long time before all the twenty-seven books were universally recognized as Scripture. The process was slow and gradual. It could not have been otherwise. It did not happen all at once and it did not occur with any authoritative pronouncement from any church council or religious body.

7. The Old Testament Had A Special Relationship To The Nation Israel

The Old Testament was a covenant document with the nation Israel. The various books were usually addressed to that nation. In the New Testament era, there was no such covenant relationship with any nation.

To sum up, the New Testament had a shorter time of composition, but a wider geographic range. This was one of the reasons for the lack of instant recognition everywhere of each book, as well as the slowness to understand the exact extent of the canon.

Since some of the recipients of the New Testament writings were isolated geographically, there would have been some uncertainty as to the exact limits of God-given Scripture—particularly when there was not a central place where authoritative decisions were made.

Consequently, these are some of the basic differences between the recognition of the two canons—the Old Testament canon and the New Testament canon.

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Summary To Question 8:

What Are Some Of The Differences Between The Recognition Of The Old Testament Canon And The Recognition Of The New Testament Canon?

There were a number of differences with respect to the recognition of the canon of the Old and the New Testament.

First, the New Testament books were all composed during the time of the apostles. This limited the potential writings that could be recognized as canonical. No one, after the time of the apostles, had any authority to compose Holy Scripture.

On the other hand, the Old Testament was written over a thousand-year period by writers who, for the most part did not even know each other. The collection of these writings was an ongoing process.

While the Old Testament canon had Jerusalem as its authoritative center, there was no such place for the New Testament church.

For the most part, the Old Testament books were addressed to the nation Israel. The New Testament writings were distributed over a wider geographic area.

The Old Testament documents were written to the descendants of Abraham—the nation of Israel, while the New Testament books were written to Gentiles (non-Jews).

While the Old Testament documents were written to a nation, the New Testament books were written to churches and individuals. Thus, the New Testament documents took much longer to be recognized by God's people compared to the Old Testament Scriptures. This is understandable given all the facts.

Thus, the New Testament documents took much longer to be recognized by God's people compared to the Old Testament Scriptures. This is understandable given all the facts.

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Question 9

What Important Factors Caused The Early Church To Recognize The Present New Testament Canon?

God divinely inspired the books that were admitted to the New Testament canon of Scripture. There were, however, many other writings that claimed some type of divine authority.

How did the people discern between that which was divinely inspired of God, and which was not? How did the early church know which books were to be placed into the canon of Scripture? What criteria did they use to determine which books had God's authority?

There are a number of important observations that we have to make to be able to answer these questions. They are as follows.

With respect to the acceptance of certain books as New Testament Scripture, there are actually two distinct questions.

Question 1: What Caused The First Believers To Accept These Books?

To begin with, we want to know what caused the first generation of Christians to initially accept, copy, read, study, and circulate these works? What was it that caused them to receive these writings as authoritative?

Question 2: How Did Believers Respond To These Books After The Apostles Died?

The second question deals with those who lived after the time of the Apostles. What factors led them to accept certain writings as having the authority of God behind them? How did they determine which works were authoritative and which were not?

There Were Three Overriding Factors

There seemed to be three important factors that caused a book to be accepted by believers—it had to teach orthodox doctrine, it had to have been written by an apostle or one from the apostolic circle, and it had to be continuously used by the church from the beginning. These were the three overriding factors that caused the early Christians to accept certain books as having God's authority behind them.

1. The Books Would Have To Teach Orthodox Doctrine: The Rule Of Faith

To begin with, any book that would come from God had to be consistent in its teachings. It would continue the teachings of Jesus and His specially chosen apostles.

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There Was A Body Of Truth Or The Apostles Doctrine

We know that the early church, from the beginning, taught the Apostles' doctrine, or the Apostles' teaching. The new believers were immediately taught about Christ. We read in the Book of Acts:

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:41,42 NRSV).

There was a limited body of truth that the church accepted as authoritative.

Jude wrote about "the faith" that had been delivered:

Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3 NRSV)

Paul wrote about the doctrine, or teaching, that lead to godly living. He said:

Anyone who teaches something different disagrees with the correct and godly teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 6:3 CEV).

It was clear that God had revealed certain specific truths or doctrines.

Believers Were Warned About False Doctrine

The Apostle Paul warned about listening to teaching that was contrary to what Christ taught:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ (Colossians 2:8 NRSV).

In addition, believers were warned about a false gospel. He wrote to the Galatians:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8,9 ESV).

If there was a "false" gospel, then there must have been a "true" gospel.

Therefore, any writing that would originate from God would teach the same "rule of faith" as was taught from the beginning. The teaching had to be consistent with what God had previously revealed through Jesus.

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2. **An Apostle Or An Associate Of An Apostle Had To Have Been Behind The Work**

Next, the writings had to have the authority of the Apostles behind them. This would guarantee that the teaching was consistent with that which God had previously revealed.

If the document originated from those specially selected men whom Jesus Himself chose and commissioned, then their authority and truthfulness was guaranteed. It was impossible for any false teaching to be contained in the writings of these hand-picked disciples. A number of points need to be made.

Apostolic Authorship Would Have Guaranteed Authority

The issue of authorship was important because of the special promises that Jesus made to His specially chosen Apostles. They were given His divine authority. If a particular writing came from an apostle, then its authority was guaranteed. This means that most of the New Testament books would have been immediately accepted by the churches. Once they recognized the work came from the hand of a genuine Apostle, the authority was assured.

Jesus Himself Appointed The Apostles

The apostles were appointed by Jesus to carry on His teaching ministry after His ascension into heaven. Matthew recorded Jesus' command as follows:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20 ESV).

He promised that the Holy Spirit would teach them in a unique way. Jesus said:

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26 NIV).

The Lord also said to His disciples that the Holy Spirit would testify of Him. In turn, these disciples would testify to others about Jesus:

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning (John 15:26-27 NIV).

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Jesus also promised that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth. He said:

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you (John 16:13,14 NIV).

When Jesus prayed to God the Father, He emphasized that His disciples would continue His work of revealing the Father.

He prayed the following.

Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them (John 17:25,26 NIV).

The early believers knew that Jesus authorized these specially selected men to continue on His work. The spoken words of the apostles, as well as their written words, were considered to be the same as the words of Christ. They were His representatives.

Most Of The Books Were Written By Apostles

The apostles wrote a number of the New Testament books. They include: the gospels of Matthew and John; the thirteen letters of Paul; two letters of Peter: three letters of John, and the Book of Revelation. This makes 21 out of 27 books.

The possibility exists that the writings of James, Jude, and Hebrews could be added to this list. They too could have been written by apostles. That would leave only the gospels of Mark and Luke, and the Book of Acts without clear apostolic authorship.

The Apostles Numbered More Than Twelve

There is some uncertainty as to how many people were in the apostolic circle. The New Testament does not restrict the title “Apostle” to only the twelve men who followed Jesus from the time of His baptism to the time of His ascension. There were more than twelve men who were with Jesus during this period. When a replacement was needed for Judas, the disciples chose between those who had been with Jesus from the beginning. The credentials for becoming one of the Twelve were as follows as the Book of Acts records:

Thus one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time the Lord Jesus associated with us, beginning from the baptism by John until the day he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness of his resurrection together with us (Acts 1:21,22 NET).

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This shows that the number of apostles was more than the “Twelve.”

Certain Others Were Called Apostles

There were others who were known as apostles. James, the brother of Jesus, is called an apostle by Paul:

Then three years later I went to Jerusalem to get to know Peter, and I stayed with him for fifteen days. The only other apostle I met at that time was James, the Lord’s brother (Galatians 1:18,19 NLT).

This puts James in the same company as the twelve apostles though he was not a follower of Jesus from the beginning.

The Apostles Spoke With The Authority Of Jesus

We find the apostles speaking and writing with Jesus’ authority. After a council of leaders met in Jerusalem, these apostles issued a statement to believers. It read in part:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements (Acts 15:28 NIV).

In another example, Paul wrote about his own authority as an apostle. He said:

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:3–5 ESV).

He also told the Corinthians that he had received godly or divine wisdom:

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual (1 Corinthians 2:12–13 ESV).

Paul told the Thessalonians that his words were the words of God. He wrote the following:

We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers (1 Thessalonians 2:13 NRSV).

His message carried the full authority of Jesus Christ.

Paul also spoke with the power of the Spirit when he wrote to the Corinthians. He put it this way:

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And my message and my preaching were very plain. I did not use wise and persuasive speeches, but the Holy Spirit was powerful among you. I did this so that you might trust the power of God rather than human wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:4-5 NLT).

Paul wrote to the Galatians about his unique authority. He said that God has specially set him apart to preach the message of Christ:

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being (Galatians 1:15,16 NRSV).

These apostles were the foundation of the church. Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19,20 ESV).

In the last book of Scripture, John testified about his authority:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Revelation 22:18,19 NET).

Therefore, we consistently find Jesus' hand-picked apostles asserting their authority. They knew they had been specially chosen by Him. Other believers recognized their unique authority.

Some Books May Not Have Been Authored By Apostles

While apostles wrote most of the New Testament, it is not necessary that every writer of a New Testament book had to have been an Apostle. A writer of a New Testament book may belong to the larger apostolic circle—people who had personal contact with the apostles.

Though the books authored by the apostles were immediately accepted as authoritative, there were a few works that were not written by apostles. Decisions had to be made concerning which ones would be accepted, and which ones would be rejected.

The church was aware that false teaching was circulating. Paul warned his readers about false teaching. He wrote the following to the church at Galatia:

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who in his love and mercy called you to share the eternal life he gives through

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Christ. You are already following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who twist and change the truth concerning Christ. Let God's curse fall on anyone, including myself, who preaches any other message than the one we told you about. Even if an angel comes from heaven and preaches any other message, let him be forever cursed (Galatians 1:6-8 NLT).

The Apostle Paul also warned about people preaching a different Jesus—a Jesus that never existed. It seems that the Corinthians were rejecting these false apostles:

You happily put up with whatever anyone tells you, even if they preach a different Jesus than the one we preach, or a different kind of Spirit than the one you received, or a different kind of gospel than the one you believed (2 Corinthians 11:4 NLT).

The New English Translation also indicates the Corinthians rejected such teaching. It says:

For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus different from the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit than the one you received, or a different gospel than the one you accepted, you put up with it well enough (2 Corinthians 11:4 NET).

The New Living Translation, however, understands Paul saying that the Corinthians were accepting this different gospel:

You seem to believe whatever anyone tells you, even if they preach about a different Jesus than the one we preach, or a different Spirit than the one you received, or a different kind of gospel than the one you believed (2 Corinthians 11:4 NLT).

Whatever the case may be, they were warned about these false apostles and false teaching. Believers were not ignorant of the fact that certain people were distorting the message of Christ.

Later in the same chapter, Paul again warned about false apostles. He wrote:

For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will correspond to their actions (2 Corinthians 11:13-15 NET).

These false apostles claimed to be special representatives of Christ. They are compared to Satan, or the devil. Consequently, the people would have had to have been on guard against false teaching.

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The Non-Apostolic Writings Were Written Under Apostolic Guidance

If we include books written not by the apostles themselves, but by people who wrote under their guidance and supervision, then all the New Testament books could be included in this category.

For example, the gospel of Mark was written from the influence of Peter. Luke, the traveling companion of Paul, wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Someone from that apostolic circle wrote the Book of Hebrews—though his present identity is unknown. James and Jude were also apostles in the wider sense of the term and, depending upon their identification, could actually have been two of the twelve Apostles.

Therefore, every New Testament book has some type of apostolic connection. This guaranteed the accuracy of the contents.

All Of The Books Were Produced In The First Century: The Antiquity Of The Writings Was Crucial

The fact that the apostles, or some people from their circle, were responsible for the books of the New Testament is an important factor in recognizing the extent of the authoritative books. One of the factors in determining the canonicity of a book was its antiquity. All of the New Testament documents were written in the first century—possibly before A.D. 70.

Books that were written after the apostolic era could not be considered candidates for the New Testament Scripture. It was only the immediate Apostles of Jesus who had that authority to speak and write for Him. No one else was given this authority, and this authority was not transferred, neither was it transferable.

There Would Have Been Guidance From The Apostles In Determining The Canon

There is also the likelihood that each of the present New Testament books received an endorsement by the living apostles. Many of the apostles were still living when most, if not all of, these books were written and circulated.

They would have been in a position to give guidance to believers concerning which writings were divinely authoritative, and which writers were not. We have one example that it was being done. Peter recognized Paul's writings as Scripture:

Don't forget that the Lord is patient because he wants people to be saved. This is also what our dear friend Paul said when he wrote you with the wisdom that God had given him. Paul talks about these same things in all his letters, but part of what he says is hard to understand. Some ignorant and unsteady people even destroy themselves by twisting what he said. They do the same thing with other Scriptures too (2 Peter 3:15,16 CEV).

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We should rightly assume that the apostles would have taken extraordinary interest in assuring the writings that were read out loud to the believers in the churches were only those written works which carried Jesus' authority.

The Church Had The Highest Regard For Apostolic Authorship

The importance of the apostles can be seen in the earliest complete list of New Testament books that we presently possess. It was compiled by Eusebius who died in the year A.D. 340. He made a distinction between twenty-one books that everyone received as authoritative and six which there was some uncertainty about.

The reason for the uncertainty is that they could not be directly traced back to an apostolic source. This shows the concern of the early church that only those writings that came from the apostles and their immediate associates had any claim to authority—all other writings did not. Eventually, the authority of the six disputed books was settled when it was found that they could be traced back to the apostles.

3. The Writings Would Have Been Used Continually Among Believers

The third important factor was continuous use by the believers. Any writings that would have God's divine authority behind them would have had to have been continually used by believers from the beginning. The New Testament lays down this principle. The writings were to be read out loud in the church and the writings were to be circulated. In what was probably Paul's earliest letter, he wrote the following:

Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them (1 Thessalonians 5:26,27 NRSV).

Earlier, in that same letter, Paul wrote:

We always thank God that you believed the message we preached. It came from him, and it isn't something made up by humans. You accepted it as God's message, and now he is working in you (1 Thessalonians 2:13 CEV).

The Apostle Paul also told the church at Colosse to circulate his letters:

And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16 CSB).

In a general letter sent out to the churches, Peter commented on Paul's letters:

And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these

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things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15,16 NKJV).

The way in which Peter spoke of the letters of Paul indicates that the knowledge of them was widespread in the church. This shows that the churches had been obedient to the command to circulate the letters of the apostles.

As the Scripture repeatedly commanded, these letters were sent out and read publicly in the various churches.

There Was Immediate And Universal Acceptance Of The Writings

Universal acceptance was another key factor in recognizing which books God had divinely inspired. Indeed, there were a number of books that were rejected by the church because it was recognized they did not have God's authority behind them.

What is impressive is that there was a surprising amount of agreement among the early believers as to the divine authority of our present New Testament books.

The Acceptance Of The New Testament Was Gradual But Continuous

The books of the New Testament were written, copied, recopied, circulated, read, studied, and cited as authoritative alongside the books of the Old Testament.

Eventually they were placed into a collection. While the New Testament writings were immediately recognized as authoritative, the need for a collection of sacred writings occurred gradually.

The Books Were Copied, Recopied And Circulated

Another important point to remember is that the books that are in our present New Testament were copied, recopied, and widely circulated among the churches. There must have been some reason for this. Obviously, the people believed these writings had some special worth to continue to circulate them.

Only The Authority Of A Few Books Was Ever Questioned

Only a few of our present New Testament books were even questioned. In addition, it was only a minority of people that had any doubts about them.

For the most part, the doubts were due to a lack of knowledge about the origin of these books. We find no example of a book that is presently in the New Testament that was originally doubted by a large number of believers, and then later accepted.

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As we mentioned, the main reason that some books were doubted was the uncertainty that the writings came from the hand of an apostle or one of their associates.

The Believers Know Jesus' Voice

It is also important to realize that most of our present New Testament was immediately accepted as Holy Scripture. This readily acceptance is in keeping with the promise of Jesus that His sheep know His voice:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me (John 10:27 NIV).

Jesus also said that those who wished to know the truth about Him would know it:

If anyone wants to do God's will, he will know about my teaching, whether it is from God or whether I speak from my own authority (John 7:17 NET).

Jesus knows those who are His and His people know who He is. This gives further testimony that false teaching would not have passed by unnoticed by the church.

Through The Holy Spirit Believers Can Discern Between The True And The False

The Apostle Paul wrote about believer's discernment through the work of the Holy Spirit. He wrote the following to the Romans:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family-calling him "Father, dear Father." For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children (Romans 8:14-16 NLT).

Paul wrote to the church of Corinth explaining that believers have the mind of Christ:

Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things that are freely given to us by God. And we speak about these things, not with words taught us by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people. The unbeliever does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The one who is spiritual discerns all things, yet he himself is understood by no one (1 Corinthians 2:12-15 NET).

Therefore, the believers in Jesus Christ would have been able to recognize divinely authoritative Scripture when they read it.

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The Process Of Canonization Is Similar To The Understanding Of Doctrines

The canon of New Testament Scripture was recognized in a similar way as some biblical doctrines. The formation of the teachings about the person and work of Jesus Christ occurred in the early centuries of the church. The doctrine of the Trinity took a couple of centuries to clarify. The doctrine of justification by faith was clarified at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

The fact that these doctrines were clarified at a certain point in history does not mean they came into existence at that time. In the same manner, the New Testament canon did not come into existence when it was generally recognized by the church—rather it came into existence with the completion of the last book that God divinely inspired.

Divine Inspiration Is The Key To Whether Or Not A Book Should Be In The Canon

The basic principle for a book to be considered part of the New Testament canon is divine inspiration. A book can only be part of the canon if it is God-breathed Scripture. This is the only criterion!

The New Testament Books Met These Three Criteria

The twenty-seven documents of the New Testament met these criteria—they were written by Apostles, or men in the apostolic circle, they were orthodox in their teaching, and the church continually used them. There was never any discussion concerning the divine authority of the majority of the New Testament writings. These documents were initially considered to be an authoritative witness of Jesus Christ. Their divine authority was never really questioned.

Summary To Question 9

What Important Factors Caused The Early Church To Recognize The New Testament Canon?

The overriding factors for acceptance of certain writings as part of the New Testament were basically three things. The work had to be orthodox in doctrine. The writing had to have come from an apostle or one from the apostolic circle. The church had to have used the work continuously from the beginning.

The criteria that were used to determine which books were to be placed in the New Testament would have included apostolic authorship. If an apostle wrote a book to be read in the churches, then it would have had immediate acceptance as Scripture.

For those writings which were not authored by an apostle there would have been the guidance by the living apostles to help the church determine what was, and what was not, written with God's divine authority.

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The fact that the books that are in our present New Testament were copied and recopied shows the value in which they were perceived as having.

The recognition of the canon is a fact of history, not a repeatable process. The early church was closer in time and had greater information than we have available today. Therefore, their judgment is to be preferred over that of modern scholars.

God divinely inspired the books that were admitted to the New Testament canon of Scripture. There were, however, many other writings that claimed some type of authority.

In addition, God's people would have been able to determine what was divinely inspired and what was not. The testimony of God's Spirit would have been a factor. God's people know His voice. The fact that the present New Testament was, for the most part, readily accepted, shows that this is the case.

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Question 10

What Minimal Factors Should Be Expected Of A Book That Is To Be Included In The New Testament Canon?

There are a certain number of minimal factors that we should expect from a book if it is to be part of the New Testament canon of Scripture. They include, at least, these six things:

1. The book must come from an authoritative source.
2. The work did not contradict truth that God had previously revealed.
3. The work must be historically accurate.
4. The message centered on the Person of Jesus Christ and His program for humanity.
5. Believers must hear the voice of God through this work.
6. The book was continually used in the church from the time of the Apostles.

We can make a number of observations about these minimal factors for books to be considered as part of the New Testament.

1. The Book Must Come From An Authoritative Source

The book must have an author who was granted unique authority by Jesus. They were the only ones whom Jesus specifically called and commissioned. No one else could qualify as an authoritative source of the teachings of Jesus, or as an interpreter of His teachings.

The people in this category would include the apostles, their immediate associates, and even the relatives of Jesus such as James and Jude.

2. It Must Be Orthodox In Teaching

Any writing that would come from the living God must be orthodox in doctrine. God would certainly not contradict something that He previously revealed.

Therefore, any work that contradicted previous Scripture is to be rejected. On the other hand, the divinely inspired writings would be used to teach Christian doctrine.

3. It Would Be Historically Accurate In All That It Says

Another important aspect is historical accuracy. For a book to come from a perfect God, we should, at the very least, expect it to be accurate in all that it says. If God is the God of truth, then whatever originates from Him

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must be true. We would not expect to find any statement that would be contrary to known historical facts.

4. It Must Further Our Knowledge Of Christ And His Commands

Jesus Christ must be at the center of any book that would be part of the New Testament. This does not mean that each of the writings must unveil new doctrines about Him. What it does mean that His Person and program must be furthered by the contents of each book.

5. Believers Must Hear The Voice Of God Through The Book

Any writing that would ultimately come from the living God would, of necessity, have His power and authority behind it. There were many books rejected by believers because this criterion could not be met.

6. The Church Must Continually Have Used The Writing

If God divinely inspired a particular writing, then we would expect that work to be received by the people of God and be continuously used in the church. Indeed, each generation of Christians would want to know who Jesus is, what He did while here upon the earth, His plan for time and eternity, as well as what He expects from us.

These criteria are the minimum that we should expect from any book that is to be placed into the New Testament canon of Scripture.

Summary To Question 10:

What Minimal Factors Should Be Expected Of A Book That Is To Be Included Into The New Testament Canon?

For a book to be considered to be Holy Scripture there is a certain minimum standard that we should expect from it. To begin with, the document must come from an authoritative source.

Next the teaching must be orthodox—it cannot contradict what was previously revealed. In addition, the writing must be historically accurate.

Furthermore, the work itself must center upon the Person of Jesus Christ and His plan for humanity. Also, the believer must hear the voice of God through this work.

Finally, the church must continually use the work from its beginning.

All of the New Testament documents meet these criteria.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 11

What Do Early Bible Translations Tell Us About The Extent Of The New Testament Canon?

One of the ways in which the early Christians affirmed which books belonged in the New Testament was by translating them into other languages. Before a translation of Scripture can be made, one must determine exactly which books were to be translated.

There were a number of early translations of the New Testament from the Greek—the language in which the New Testament was originally written. The two earliest translations were the Syriac and the Old Latin. Each of these translations was completed by the year A.D. 170.

The Syriac Peshitta

The Syriac churches were located in the Eastern Roman Empire. A translation of the books of the New Testament, known as the Peshitta, was made into Syriac at an early date. This translation included all of the present books of the New Testament except 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.

The books omitted in the Peshitta were originally sent to destinations in the Western part of the Roman Empire. This explains their omission in the Eastern part of the empire. Eventually all of these books were accepted in the East.

The Old Latin

The New Testament was also translated into Latin in the second century. The Old Latin New Testament contains every book except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter. These writings were originally sent to the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Eventually the churches in the West accepted these books as Scripture.

Therefore, since A.D. 170 there has been consensus on nineteen of the twenty-seven books. Only Hebrews, James, 1,2 Peter, 2,3, John, Jude and Revelation were not universally attested.

All Of Present New Testament Is In These Two Translations (With One Exception)

We also find that when the two collections are put together, they make up our present New Testament (with the exception of 2 Peter). Therefore, from the two earliest translations, we find that no other books were translated and considered to be Holy Scripture except the books that we now possess.

This gives us further assurance that our present New Testament consists of exactly the right number of books which God gave to humanity as part of a new revelation of Himself.

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Summary To Question 11: What Do Early Bible Translations Tell Us About The Extent Of The New Testament Canon?

The two earliest translations of the New Testament, into languages other than Greek, are quite instructive. The Syriac Peshitta and the Old Latin were each done around A.D. 170. Nineteen, out of the twenty-seven books, are found in both the Syriac Peshitta and Old Latin. Seven of them are found in one of the other translations. Only Second Peter is missing from both.

Thus, twenty-six out of the twenty-seven New Testament books were translated at this early date. In addition, no other books were translated along with these twenty-six books in these two earliest translations.

This is another indication that the correct books are indeed in the New Testament.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 12

How Does Constantine's Fifty Copies Of Scripture Help Us Understand The Extent Of The New Testament Canon?

One helpful factor in determining the extent of the New Testament canon was the command given by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the fourth century to have fifty copies of the Scripture produced. We can summarize the events that occurred as follows.

1. Christianity Is Persecuted Under The Roman Emperor Diocletian

At the beginning of the fourth century, Christianity was persecuted by the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Among other things, the Holy Scriptures of the Christians were sought out and destroyed by the authority of the Emperor in his Imperial Edict in A.D. 303. Christian churches were also burned. Many Christians lost their lives during this terrible period for the church.

2. The Next Emperor Constantine Becomes A Christian

The historical irony is that the next Emperor, Constantine, became a Christian. Instead of being a persecuted religion, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. And, instead of ordering the destruction of the Christian Scripture, Constantine ordered accurate copies to be made.

3. Constantine Asks Eusebius To Have Fifty Copies Of Scripture Produced

In A.D. 330, Constantine inaugurated his new capital at Constantinople, formerly called Byzantium. Shortly thereafter, the Emperor wrote to the church father Eusebius and asked him to have fifty copies of the Scriptures produced and sent to Constantinople.

Each of these copies would have included the entire Old Testament and New Testament in Greek. These copies were to be used in the churches in Constantinople. Eusebius has preserved Constantine's letter to him in his work called *The Life of Constantine*.

Constantine asked for the copies of Scripture to be made on the best parchment, or animal skins, and copied by the best trained scribes. The Emperor himself would pay the expense for their production. Eusebius complied with Constantine's request and the Scriptures were prepared and sent to Constantine.

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4. Eusebius Does Not Tell Us Which Books Were In The Canon

While Eusebius tells us that he complied with Constantine's request, and had these fifty copies produced, he nowhere tells us which books were included in the copies of the Old and New Testament.

Though there is no specific list, the issue of their content is not really in doubt. Eusebius, in his other writings, informs us as to which books were universally acknowledged by the church as being Holy Scripture. These are the same twenty-seven books that are in our present New Testament canon.

While Eusebius said that certain of the New Testament books were questioned by some people, the majority of believers accepted these, and only these writings as divinely inspired.

The Importance Of Constantine's Request

This request of Constantine is important for a number of reasons. They are as follows:

1. There Was An Authoritative Scripture That Existed

To begin with, the fact that he could ask for fifty copies of the Scriptures to be produced demonstrates there was such a thing as an authoritative Scripture to copy.

The request would make no sense whatsoever if there were not some universally accepted list of books that were considered to be Scripture. Constantine obviously knew of such a list—he did not have to specify to Eusebius the names of the books that were to be copied.

2. These Books Were Already Well-Known To All

Also, the fact that Eusebius does not see fit to provide a list is another indication that these books had already been recognized as being canonical. It was not necessary to explain which books were recognized as New Testament Scripture. It seems that they were well-known to everyone.

3. These Fifty Bible Would Be A Basis For Other Copies

There is something else. These fifty copies would have also served as a basis for any other copies of Scripture that were to be produced.

Therefore, from the request of Emperor Constantine to the church historian Eusebius, we have further evidence that the New Testament canon was firmly fixed in the mind of believers.

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Summary To Question 12:

How Does Constantine's Fifty Copies Of Scripture Help Us Understand The Extent Of The New Testament Canon?

The request of the fourth century Roman emperor Constantine, for the church Father Eusebius to have fifty copies of the Scriptures produced at government expense, gives us further insight into the extent of the canon at that time.

To make the request, there had to be such a thing as the Christian Scripture. The fact that neither Constantine nor Eusebius list which books were to be in these copies tells us that a completed authoritative list of sacred books already existed.

Furthermore, this list was seemingly well-known to all. These copies would have served as a basis for future copies of the Bible that were to be produced. This episode is another confirmation that the Christian canon had been settled in the minds of the people for some time.

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Question 13

How Do The Earliest Complete Greek Manuscripts Help Us Understand The Extent Of The New Testament Canon?

Another factor that can help us with our understanding of the extent of the New Testament canon concerns the ancient Greek manuscripts that still exist.

There are three early manuscripts of the New Testament that are complete or nearly complete. They can provide further help in the quest for the exact contents of the New Testament canon. We can summarize what we find as follows.

Codex Vaticanus

Codex Vaticanus, or “B” as it is also called, is an ancient uncial manuscript of the New Testament that was copied in the early part of the fourth century A.D. An uncial manuscript was written with large, clearly formed letters, on parchment or animal skins.

Copied in about A.D. 325, Vaticanus originally contained the entire New Testament. However, today Hebrews 9:15 through the Book of Revelation is missing.

The order of the books in Vaticanus is as follows: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude; Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, and Hebrews.

It will be noted that the only books missing are the three letters Paul wrote to individuals: First and Second Timothy, Titus, and Philemon as well as the Book of Revelation.

Hebrews was placed between the letters Paul wrote to the churches and those to which he wrote to individuals. The universal letters follow the Book of Acts instead of the letters of Paul.

The rest of the Book of Hebrews, as well as the Book of Revelation, were added to Codex Vaticanus by a scribe in the fifteen century.

Codex Sinaiticus

Codex Sinaiticus was probably copied a few years later than Codex Vaticanus (about A.D. 350). Unlike Vaticanus, it is a complete manuscript of the New Testament; the oldest complete Greek manuscript of the New Testament that exists. It contains all of the books of the New Testament.

The order of books in Sinaiticus is as follows: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Timothy, 2

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Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Acts, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation.

We can observe that Sinaiticus has a different order of books than Vaticanus. The letters of Paul are placed after the four gospels but before the Book of Acts. Hebrews is listed after the letters of Paul to the various churches.

There is something else. Sinaiticus also contains two books of the New Testament Apocrypha: the Letter of Barnabas and part of the Shepherd of Hermas. These are placed after the New Testament in Codex Sinaiticus.

Codex Alexandrinus

Codex Alexandrinus is a fifth century Greek manuscript that contains all of the books of the New Testament. However, parts are missing. The order of books, and their contents, is as follows.

Matthew 25:6-28:20, Mark, Luke, John (John 6:50-8:52 are missing), Acts, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians (4:13-12:6 is missing), Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and finally the Book of Revelation. After the New Testament, 1 Clement, and 2 Clement 1:1-12:5 are also included in Codex Alexandrinus.

Observations On These Manuscripts

From these ancient Greek manuscripts, we can make a number of important observations.

First, the books that were part of the New Testament are the same in each list. No books are deleted and none are added. The number of writings that belonged in the New Testament was fixed long before this time. This shows that there was a standard list of books.

The fact that other books were copied and placed after the New Testament books is consistent with the practice of the church at that time. These other writings were read in the church, along with the New Testament, but they were never considered to be divinely inspired. They were read for instruction in godly living but not for doctrine.

We also find that the writings had a natural ordering. The four gospels are always placed first and are found together in the same order—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Paul's writings are always together as a unit though Hebrews is placed between his letters to the churches and those which he wrote to individuals.

The universal letters are also grouped together and found in the same order. The Book of Revelation, written by John, is always placed last. Again, this testifies to a fixed number of writings as well as a fixed grouping

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within the writings. This is another indication that the extent of the canon of the New Testament was settled.

Summary To Question 13:

How Do The Earliest Complete Greek Manuscripts Help Us Understand The Extent Of The New Testament Canon?

The three oldest complete, or nearly complete, uncial manuscripts of the New Testament give us further insight as to the extent of the canon at that period in the history of the church.

Among other things, they give further confirmation that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were the only writings that the church received as New Testament Scripture. No books were added to these twenty-seven and none of the books were deleted.

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Question 14

Why Should The Present New Testament Books Be Accepted As Authoritative Writings?

The New Testament writings were authoritative the moment they were written. Although the Bible does not speak of a completed New Testament canon, it does provide internal testimony to authenticate the writings that now make up the New Testament. Consequently, there are a number of reasons as to why the present New Testament books are demonstrated to be authoritative.

1. The Four Gospels Are All Linked To Jesus

To begin with, the writers of the four gospels all have direct links to Jesus. We discover this in the following ways.

Matthew Was An Apostle (Matthew)

Matthew, the writer of the first gospel was one of Jesus' apostles. He records his own conversion as follows:

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax booth. "Follow me," he said to him. And he got up and followed him (Matthew 9:9 NET).

Matthew writes as one who heard the sayings and viewed the events of Jesus' ministry as an eyewitness. Therefore, his testimony is of the highest authority.

Mark Wrote Down Peter's Teachings (Mark)

Mark, or John Mark as he is also known, was not one of the apostles. However, according to early testimony, Mark wrote the account of the life of Jesus from the perspective of Simon Peter. Indeed, in his first letter, we find Peter calling Mark "my son:"

She who is in Babylon, also chosen, sends you greetings, as does Mark, my son (1 Peter 5:13 CSB).

The New Revised Standard Version says:

Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark (1 Peter 5:13 NRSV).

This gives further testimony to the close relationship of John Mark to Peter. Thus, Mark's gospel would have the authority of Peter behind it. This, of course, would have a direct link to Jesus.

It is also possible that Mark was merely recording Peter's speeches. Thus, what we have in the gospel of Mark are the words of Peter faithfully

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recorded by Mark. If this is the case, then the gospel, being the words of Peter, would carry the utmost authority.

Luke, Paul's Traveling Companion, Recorded Eyewitness Testimony (Luke, Acts)

Luke, the traveling companion of Paul, compiled his gospel from a number of sources. In his prologue he explained his use of sources:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed (Luke 1:1-4 NKJV).

While Luke was not one of the apostles, his writings (Luke/Acts) were accepted because of his association with Paul—an Apostle. On one occasion, Paul called the writings of Luke “Scripture.” He wrote as follows:

For the Scripture says, “Do not keep an ox from eating as it treads out the grain.” And in another place, “Those who work deserve their pay!” (1 Timothy 5:18 NLT).

“Those who work deserve their pay” is a quotation of Jesus’ words found in Luke 10:7. Therefore, Paul cites Luke’s writings as Scripture.

John Was One Of The Twelve (John)

John was an Apostle and eyewitness of the events he recorded:

This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true (John 21:24 NIV).

John wrote the things that he had seen and heard. Consequently, each of these four writers was in a position to write an accurate, authoritative account of the life of Jesus.

2. Paul's Writings Were Testified To By Peter

The next witness is Paul. He made it clear that he was an Apostle. He wrote to the Corinthians:

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? (1 Corinthians 9:1 NIV).

In one of Paul’s earliest letters, usually dated around the year A.D. 51, he contended that his words were to be received as the words of God:

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We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers (1 Thessalonians 2:13 NRSV).

Peter acknowledged Paul's writings as Holy Scripture:

And remember, the Lord is waiting so that people have time to be saved. This is just as our beloved brother Paul wrote to you with the wisdom God gave him—speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters around to mean something quite different from what he meant, just as they do the other parts of Scripture—and the result is disaster for them (2 Peter 3:15,16 NLT).

Peter, as well as the other apostles, had been given the same authority as Jesus. Consequently, he could make this authoritative statement regarding Paul's writings. Peter said that Paul's writings should be considered Scripture.

3. James Was An Apostle And Jesus' Brother (James)

The writer of the Book of James was probably not one of the two men named James who were among Jesus' Twelve Disciples. They were James the son of Zebedee, and brother of John, and James the son of Alphaeus. The James who wrote the book that bears his name was most likely the half-brother of Jesus.

While not one of the Twelve, James was considered an Apostle. When Peter escaped from prison, he wanted James notified:

He gave them a signal with his hand to be quiet and then related to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. He said, "Tell James and the brothers these things," and then he left and went to another place (Acts 12:17 NET).

Paul stated that James was an eyewitness to Christ's resurrection. He wrote:

After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:7 KJV).

To the Galatians Paul wrote:

But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19 NKJV).

At the council of Jerusalem, it was James who seems to have made the authoritative decision about the situation concerning the Gentiles. The account reads as follows:

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After they stopped speaking, James responded: “Brothers, listen to me! Simeon has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for His name. And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written: After these things I will return and will rebuild David’s tent, which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins and will set it up again, so that those who are left of mankind may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does these things, which have been known from long ago. Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those who turn to God from among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:13-19 CSB).

These passages show that James was considered to be an apostle as well as a figure of authority in the early church.

4. Peter Was One Of The Twelve (First And Second Peter)

First and Second Peter were written by the apostle Peter. He wrote the following introduction to his first letter:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance (1 Peter 1:1,2 NIV).

He also identifies himself in his second letter:

Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours (2 Peter 1:1 NIV).

As the most prominent of Jesus’ apostles, his authority was unquestioned.

5. John Was One Of The Twelve (1,2,3 John)

The letters of 1,2,3 John were written by the Apostle John. In First John, the author does not identify himself. However, in Second John, he does not use his name but rather the term, “the elder:”

From the elder, to an elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth (and not I alone, but also all those who know the truth), because of the truth that resides in us and will be with us forever (2 John 1,2 NET).

In Third John, the author also introduces himself this way:

From the elder, to Gaius my dear brother, whom I love in truth (3 John 1 NET).

The same author wrote all three letters. John, being one of the Twelve, had Jesus’ unique authority.

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The Book Of Revelation

The Book of Revelation names John as the author. It says:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John (Revelation 1:1 NIV).

Seven times John uses the phrase, “the one who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says” (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). As one of Jesus’ inner circle of apostles, he would have written with the utmost authority.

6. Jude Was Jesus’ Brother And Probably An Apostle (Jude)

Jude may have been an Apostle. However, in his introduction, he was associated with James—who was an Apostle. He was the most likely the half-brother of Jesus. He introduced himself as follows:

From Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ and brother of James, to those who are called, wrapped in the love of God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ (Jude 1 NET).

It is possible, even likely, that the resurrected Jesus made an appearance to Jude that was not recorded in the New Testament. This may be hinted at by a statement made in the Book of Acts:

The apostles often met together and prayed with a single purpose in mind. The women and Mary the mother of Jesus would meet with them, and so would his brothers (Acts 1:14 CEV).

The fact that more than one of Jesus’ brothers was there with the church indicates that they had come to believe in Him as the Messiah. We are told that before His death they did not believe in Him. John wrote:

Even Jesus’ brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5 NCV)

The fact that His brothers believed in Him after His resurrection may well indicate that He appeared to each of them. However, we simply do not have enough information to say one way or the other.

7. Only The Book Of Hebrews Does Not Have A Known Connection With Jesus

The only New Testament book without an obvious direct link to Jesus, or His apostles, is the Book of Hebrews. The problem is that we do not know the identity of the human author. The early Christians did not have this problem because the author was familiar to them. Unfortunately, his identity is not presently known.

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However, many accepted Hebrews based upon the idea that Paul wrote it. Others, while rejecting Paul's authorship, still believed Hebrews had apostolic authority, and thus ultimately God's authority.

It must be emphasized that the teachings of the Book of Hebrews are consistent with the remainder of the New Testament revelation. The book certainly adds to our knowledge about the Person and work of Christ without contradicting anything that has been previously revealed.

There Are Two Basic Questions That Need Answering: Authorship And Date (Who Wrote The Work And When Did They Write It?)

There were two basic questions with respect to the genuineness of New Testament writings—the authorship and date. Did genuine apostles write the books? Was the writing composed at the time these men were still alive? Since only these men were given the unique authority of Jesus these two questions had to be addressed.

Because these writers were uniquely chosen by Jesus, His authority stands behind the books they wrote. Consequently, His authority stands behind the entire New Testament.

Summary To Question 14: Why Should The Present New Testament Books Be Accepted As Authoritative Writings?

Although there is nothing directly stated in the New Testament with respect to the extent of the canon, there is sufficient evidence for trusting those books that have been included. With the exception of the Book of Hebrews, all of the New Testament writings have an obvious direct link to Jesus.

Of the four gospels, Matthew and John were numbered with Jesus' Twelve Disciples. Mark wrote Peter's testimony of Jesus' life and ministry while Luke based his work on historical investigation of the eyewitnesses and their evidence.

Luke is connected to the inner circle of New Testament leaders by his relationship with Paul. Paul called Luke's gospel "Scripture." Luke also wrote the Book of Acts—a brief history of the early church.

Paul claimed that his writings had God's authority behind them. Peter confirmed Paul's writings as Scripture. In addition, Peter himself wrote two letters that are part of the New Testament. The other writers, James and Jude, were probably the brothers of Jesus. James was called an Apostle.

Finally, John the Apostle the writer of the fourth gospel wrote three additional letters as well as the Book of Revelation. His authority was unquestioned.

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If the writings came from an apostle, in which they wrote in their role as an apostle, then it would have guaranteed their authority. Paul, as an apostle, affirms Luke while Peter affirmed Paul.

Therefore, each of the books of the New Testament can be directly traced back to those who intimately knew Jesus (Matthew, Peter, John, James, and Jude), one who was specifically called by him (Paul), and one who was aligned with Paul (Luke). Only the Book of Hebrews does not have this direct link that we are aware of.

However, in the early church, there were many who linked Paul, in some manner, with the Book of Hebrews.

In sum, there are excellent reasons to accept each New Testament book as being divinely authoritative.

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Question 15

Is There A Certain Form Of The New Testament Text That Should Be Considered Canonical?

One of the questions concerning the extent of the New Testament canon has to do with the very words found in each book. We know that in the process of copying and recopying the text some variations, or variants readings, found their way into the manuscripts. Some words were added while others were deleted. Most of this occurred by accident.

How are we to understand these variations? Can we discover a form of the text that we should consider as canonical?

There have been a number of ways in which believers have dealt with this issue. They can be summed up as follows.

Some Believe There Is A Divinely Inspired Form Of The Text

There have been those who have argued that only one form of the Greek text has God's divine inspiration behind it. All other forms either add or take away from that which God has divinely revealed.

This view has been popularized by some who argue that the majority of Greek manuscripts, also known as the "Majority Text," or the *Textus Receptus*, should be seen as the one, true New Testament text.

The *Textus Receptus* was the name given to the Greek text that was basically used to translate the New Testament in the *King James* Version of 1611. The Majority Text is the name given to a modern attempt to put a text together based upon the majority of the surviving Greek manuscripts.

Some people go as far as to say that any translation of the New Testament that is not based upon the majority of manuscripts, or the *Textus Receptus*, is not really the Word of God.

Therefore, the canonical text of the New Testament is equated with these manuscripts and these manuscripts alone.

There are many problems with this sort of perspective. For one thing, there are variations among the manuscripts of the Majority Text—they do not all read the same. In fact, the Majority Text of today has about 1,800 differences than the *Textus Receptus*!

Thus, in a number of cases, some type of decision has to be made to determine which reading is the best among the majority of manuscripts. Once this is practiced, it cannot be consistently argued that only one type of Greek text is the canonical text. A better answer needs to be found.

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All Forms Are Authoritative

It seems best to conclude that all of the various forms in which the Greek text has come down to us have God's authority behind them. Indeed, the surviving manuscripts read exactly the same in about 85% of the places in the New Testament. Even where there is variation, it does not affect the ultimate meaning of the message.

Therefore, contrary to some, we should not conclude that there is some sort of divinely inspired, or canonical, text that can be determined by either looking at the majority of the manuscripts or by assuming that God only providentially preserved His Word in one line of Greek manuscripts. God's Word comes through loud and clear in all of the surviving manuscripts. We cover this issue in detail in our book, *The Message of the Bible Has Not Been Changed*.

While we should do our best to recover the original text of Scripture, the text has been transmitted to such an accurate degree that we can be confident that we are reading the Word of God when we read the various translations of Scripture.

Summary To Question 15:

Is There A Certain Form Of The New Testament Text That Should Be Considered Canonical?

The believers in Jesus knew the extent of the New Testament canon. There were twenty-seven books that God has divinely inspired during the era when Christ came into the world.

However, when the various books that belong to Holy Scripture were copied, variations crept into the text—the surviving manuscripts do not all read the same.

Yet, this was never a major issue with for Christians. They did not worry about some form of the text that should be considered canonical while other forms were not. While the text was not copied perfectly, the message can still be found in each one of the manuscripts that still exist.

Therefore, we do not have to resort to thinking that God only divinely inspired one group of New Testament manuscripts as some have contended.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 16

Why Was The Authority Of Certain New Testament Books Questioned? (The Antilegomena)

Most of the books of the New Testament were immediately received as authoritative by the church. These accepted books were known as the *homologomena* that is, “the books spoken for.”

However, some of the books that are now in the New Testament canon have been, at times, questioned as being divinely authoritative. They are known as the *antilegomena*, “the books spoken against.”

There were seven books whose authority was doubted by some members of the early church. The reasons vary from book to book. We can list the main issues as follows.

1. The Book Of Hebrews Was Anonymous

The main problem, that some of members of the early church had with the Book of Hebrews was that it was written anonymously. While the original recipients knew who the author was, this eventually became forgotten. Although a number of candidates have been suggested, today no one was certain who wrote the book.

There is another issue. The writer makes a distinction between himself and the Apostles. He wrote:

How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2:3,4 NRSV).

However, the author does claim authority for his work. At the end of the book the writer says:

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly (Hebrews 13:22 NRSV).

From the earliest times, the letter to the Hebrews was accepted everywhere but in Latin Christianity—the western church. The problem was lack of a stated author. However, it was eventually realized that the Book of Hebrews was orthodox in its content and deserved a place in the New Testament.

2. James' Authorship And Teaching Were Challenged

Some in the early church challenged the authorship of the Book of James, as well as its teaching. While James was not one of the original “Twelve Disciples,” he was a leader in the early church (Acts 15; Galatians 1).

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James was most likely the half-brother of Jesus. There were some in the Western church that did not realize whom he was. Once his identity was finally confirmed, the problem vanished in the West.

During the time of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther questioned the authority of the Book of James. He initially thought it taught salvation by works and called it, “a right strawy Epistle.”

Consequently, in the first edition of his German translation of the New Testament, Luther put James as an appendix.

However, it must be noted that in his various writings, Luther quoted over one half of the verses of the Book of James as authoritative Scripture.

The main problem that Luther and others have had with James was the content. The issue can be stated as follows: Is James in conflict with Paul concerning how one could be saved? James does put more emphasis on works than do the other New Testament writings.

However, there is no contradiction. James is not so much theological, as it is practical. It fits a much-needed gap between the doctrine and practice of Christianity. When Paul and James are properly understood, there is no contradiction between them. Paul teaches that faith alone saves, while James emphasizes that the faith that saves is not alone.

3. Second Peter Had A Number Of Questions About It

The most suspect of all the books of the New Testament is Second Peter. There are a number of reasons as to why Peter’s authorship is questioned. They include the following.

The Two Books Attributed To Peter Were Written In A Different Style

First, the style of the two books, First and Second Peter, is remarkably different. It seems obvious that two different writers were involved.

The stylistic differences may be explained by Peter’s use of an amanuensis, or secretary, who did the writing for him. The first letter may have been written by Silas (Silvanus). We find the following statement made by Peter:

With the help of Silas, Silvanus, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it (1 Peter 5:12 NIV).

The English Standard Version translates the verse in this manner:

By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it (1 Peter 5:12 ESV).

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The phrase “by Silvanus” or “with the help of Silas” may refer to the fact that Silas, or Silvanus, was the writer of the letter, or it may mean that Silas delivered the letter. We are not certain which is correct.

The second letter may have been written by Peter himself, or with the use of another scribe. This would explain the differences in style.

Second Peter Quotes From Jude

Second Peter quotes from the Book of Jude. It is argued that the genuine Peter would never have done this. However, it is just as likely that Jude quoted from Peter rather than Peter from Jude.

Even if this is not the case, why should it be a problem for Peter to quote from another part of Scripture to support his argument?

Second Peter Is Cited Later In History

The earliest testimony about Second Peter is relative late in Christian history. It is contended that the earliest testimony is negative. This shows that some had questions about the authority of this book.

However, there are a number of allusions to Second Peter in the writings of some very early church Fathers.

In addition, this book is contained in P⁷²—a third century Greek manuscript. This shows that it was collected with other New Testament books at an early date.

Finally, there is a remote possibility that a fragment from Second Peter was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. If true, this would prove that Second Peter was composed before A.D. 70.

However, the evidence for Second Peter among the Dead Sea Scrolls is slender at best.

The Writer Tries To Prove He Is Peter

It is also alleged that the author of Second Peter tries too hard to prove that he is actually Simon Peter. For example, he cites his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration when Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. He describes it as follows:

For we did not follow cleverly concocted fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; no, we were eyewitnesses of his grandeur. For he received honor and glory from God the Father, when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory: “This is my dear Son, in whom I am delighted.” When this voice was conveyed from heaven, we ourselves heard it, for we were with him on the holy mountain (2 Peter 1:16-18 NET).

The English Standard Version translates the verses in this manner:

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For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain (2 Peter 1:16-18 ESV).

The fact that the writers speak of being present at the Transfiguration supposedly shows it was not Peter. This argument is too subjective. The fact that he mentions a significant event in Peter’s life may be because he actually was Peter!

Peter’s Name Was Frequently Forged In The Early Church

It is also a fact that Peter’s name was frequently used in the early years of the church for writings that were not his. However, this proves nothing one way or the other. The forgery has to be proved—not merely assumed.

The Content Shows Its Lateness

There is the argument that the content of Second Peter shows that it is a late production. This argument is also suspect. It is based upon the assumption that statements made in the letter reflect a time later than the first century. Yet there is no real evidence of this in Second Peter.

While most non-believers reject Peter’s authorship of this book, there are sufficient reasons for believing that Peter was the actual writer.

4. Second And Third John Has No Stated Author

Second and Third John were questioned for several reasons. For one thing, the author was not specifically stated—he is called merely “the elder:”

From the Elder. To the chosen lady and her children: I love all of you in the truth, and all those who know the truth love you (2 John 1 NCV).

In addition, early Christians do not often cite these letters. There does not seem to be much evidence that they were considered to be authoritative by those in the early church.

The reasons for doubting these two letters of John are not very strong. The lack of their wide circulation is easily explained. Both of these letters were addressed to individuals, both are very brief, and neither have much theological content.

Consequently, they would not have had very wide circulation. Because of these factors there were not too many early writers who would quote from them. This led to their slow recognition.

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There are a number of arguments in favor of John's authorship. They include the following:

First, the early church father Polycarp, who was a disciple of John, testified to the genuineness of Second John.

Second, the translation of the New Testament into Old Latin contained these works, as did the Muratorian Canon—a second century New Testament list.

There is more. The believers in Asia were so familiar with John that he could use the term “the elder” without any further explanation.

The term “elder” could be used as a special designation for an apostle and his office. In First Peter we read about Peter's mention of elders:

Church leaders, I am writing to encourage you. I too am a leader, as well as a witness to Christ's suffering, and I will share in his glory when it is shown to us. Just as shepherds watch over their sheep, you must watch over everyone God has placed in your care. Do it willingly in order to please God, and not simply because you think you must. Let it be something you want to do, instead of something you do merely to make money. Don't be bossy to those people who are in your care, but set an example for them (1 Peter 5:1-3 CEV).

Second and Third John are written in similar style as First John. First John was widely acknowledged as coming from the Apostle John. Therefore, there is sufficient evidence to link Second and Third John with John the Apostle.

5. Jude Seemingly Quoted From Non-Canonical Sources

The Book of Jude was questioned as being authoritative Scripture for his use of the two books that have never been part of the Old Testament canon—the Book of Enoch and the Testament of Moses.

The Book of Enoch is seemingly cited as an authoritative source. We read the following in Jude:

Now Enoch, who lived seven generations after Adam, prophesied about these people. He said, “Look, the Lord is coming with thousands of his holy ones. He will bring the people of the world to judgment. He will convict the ungodly of all the evil things they have done in rebellion and of all the insults that godless sinners have spoken against him” (Jude 14-15 NLT).

This seems to be a direct citation from 1 Enoch 1:9 which reads as follows:

Behold, he will arrive with ten million of the holy ones in order to execute judgment upon all, he will destroy the wicked ones and censure all flesh on account of everything that they have done, that which the sinners and wicked ones committed against him (1 Enoch 1:9)

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There is also a possible reference in Jude to another written work called the Testament of Moses. We read the following:

Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, "The Lord rebuke you" (Jude 9 NKJV).

The Bible says that Moses' body was buried in an unknown site:

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan . . . Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day (Deuteronomy 34:1,5,6 NRSV).

While Michael the archangel is mentioned in the Old Testament in Daniel 10:13, he is not mentioned in connection with disputing over the body of Moses. In fact, there is no mention of anyone arguing over Moses' body. Obviously, the source of this story was from outside the Old Testament.

In the *Testament of Moses*, further details are added to the biblical story. First, we are told that it was Michael the archangel who was given the job of burying Moses. The devil then got into an argument with Michael over Moses' body. The devil said that Moses was not worthy to be buried because he was a murderer. The Scripture does indeed say that earlier in his life Moses had killed an Egyptian. This account is recorded in Exodus 2:11,12.

Since Moses was a murderer, the devil assumed that this man did not deserve to be buried by an archangel. Thus, the devil believed that he had the right to Moses' body. Michael, in response, said, "The Lord rebuke you." This same phrase is found in the Old Testament Zechariah 3:2. In this instance, the Lord Himself asserted His own authority over that of the devil.

The account is possibly taken from the work known as the Testament of Moses, or the Assumption of Moses. Although this work exists in manuscript form today, the part about Michael disputing with the devil is missing.

Early church fathers, however, said that this work contained the story of Michael disputing with Moses. Therefore, it is likely if the missing part were found we would find this episode.

The Statements Are True But The Sources Are Not Authoritative

Jude clearly accepted the statement of Enoch as true, as well as the story of Michael and the devil disputing over the body of Moses as an historical fact.

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However, we should view Jude's citation as similar to Paul citing heathen poets. He did this on three occasions; Acts 17:28; 1 Corinthians 15:23, and Titus 1:12. While the works are not divinely authoritative, the statements cited in these works are true.

Yet, these works contain untruths. Indeed, the Book of Enoch contains much material that is fanciful and mythological. Also, in the Assumption of Moses, there is a statement which is attributed to the devil that says that all matter is inherently evil. This is contrary to what the Bible teaches on the subject.

We should also note that Jude is not introducing either of these citations with such words as "It is written" or "God said." He is citing the truth of these statements that goes back to the original source.

As far as where Jude got the information about the statement of Enoch, we cannot be certain. It is possible that he is citing the book known as the Book of Enoch.

However, it is also possible that he had an ancient written source that was used by him as well as the author of the Book of Enoch. On the other hand, Jude could be citing some ancient oral tradition. We just do not know.

It should be noted that there is also some doubt as to whether Jude is quoting from the text of Enoch. The quotation which we find in Jude does differ in some respects with the text of Book of Enoch that we now have. For example, Jude makes "the Lord" the subject of the sentence he cites from Enoch, the Book of Enoch does not.

In addition, Jude cites the quotation from the perspective of the return of Christ to the earth in judgment. The Book of Enoch does not do this either.

Therefore, the most anyone can say is that this is an "apparent quotation" of the Book of Enoch by Jude. Even if Jude is citing the Book of Enoch, he is merely citing the truth of the statement, not the divine inspiration of the book. Consequently, Jude is not citing a work as authoritative Scripture which was not included in the Hebrew canon by the Jews.

Interestingly, in the early church, the Book of Enoch was held in high regard. The fact that Jude may have cited from it caused some church leaders to argue for its authority. However, when it was later realized that the Book of Enoch was not written by the biblical Enoch, nor was it an authoritative writing, doubts were then cast upon the Book of Jude for seemingly citing it.

Yet this is not necessary. As we have seen, there is nothing in Jude's citation that gives any type of authority to the Book of Enoch or for the work known as the Assumption of Moses.

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The Book Of Revelation Was Misused By Some Heretical Groups

It is no surprise that the Book of Revelation would meet some opposition due to the apocalyptic nature of the work. However, it had almost instant recognition almost everywhere. Yet, in the fourth century some questions arose concerning it. This was due, in part, to some heretical groups misusing the book.

The author clearly identifies himself as John the Apostle:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John (Revelation 1:1 NIV).

At the end of the Book of Revelation, John says:

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!" (Revelation 22:8,9 NRSV).

This work clearly claims to be from John. The only John to whom this could be referring is the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus' twelve Apostles.

The Book of Revelation certainly has the credentials which we would expect of a divinely inspired work. Furthermore, the Book of Revelation is necessary to complete God's account of His dealings with the human race.

In fact, without the Book of Revelation, we would not know what will happen in the future. Indeed, the biblical story of humanity would be incomplete.

Observations On The Disputed Books

Three points need to be stressed with respect to these so-called disputed New Testament books. They are as follows.

1. Only Some Of The New Testament Writings Were Questioned

It must be stressed that it was only some people in the church, not all of them, that questioned only these seven books. The great majority of the books that make up the New Testament were never questioned by the great majority of the people.

The seven books that were questioned were eventually recognized as Scripture by the entire church. The fact that questions were asked about them only demonstrates the care was taken about this important issue.

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2. There Was No Debate Later In History

Once the church formally recognized the twenty-seven books, there was no later debate to add to them—as was the case with the Old Testament Apocrypha. There has been no real debate to add or subtract to these books since that time. All branches of Christendom—Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox, accept these twenty-seven books, and only these twenty-seven books, as New Testament Scripture.

3. There Is Nothing In These Books That Conflicts With The Rest Of The New Testament

It must be also emphasized that nothing in these seven books contains any doctrine that conflicts with the other twenty accepted New Testament books. These seven books were not only in continuous use in the church from the beginning, there is nothing in them that contradicts other Scripture. This is what we should expect from writings that were divinely inspired.

Summary To Question 16: Why Was The Authority Of Certain New Testament Books Questioned? (The Antilegomena)

The New Testament books that were immediately accepted by all believers were known as the *homologomena*. However, there were a few books of the New Testament that had their authority questioned. These were known as the *antilegomena*—the books spoken against.

It is important that we note that there was only a minority of church leaders who spoke out against the books. These antilegomena included Hebrews, James, Second Peter, Second and Third John, Jude and Revelation. The reason for questioning their divine authority varied from book to book.

Hebrews was questioned because of its anonymous authorship. James was questioned because it seemed to emphasize works more than grace.

Second Peter was questioned for a number of reasons. This includes differences in style between the two letters, the questions that some in the early church had regarding its authority, and the fact that the work quoted from Jude.

Add to this the fact that Peter's name was often forged on many early works. There are also parts within the book that seem to show a late date. It is also contended that the author tries too hard to prove that he is Peter. However, all of these criticisms have satisfying answers. There is no real reason for rejecting Peter's authorship.

Second and Third John were questioned because the author was not specifically stated. In addition, these letters are brief and do not have much theological content.

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Jude was questioned for his supposed use of the apocryphal sources such as the Book of Enoch and the Testament of Moses. Yet, he merely cites the truth of the statements—he does not call these writings Scripture or give any indication that he considered them to be Scripture.

The Book of Revelation was questioned due to the nature of the work. However, it was eventually realized by all that the Book of Revelation belongs in the New Testament canon.

Eventually, when more evidence became available to the people of God, we find that each these writings were accepted as Holy Scripture.

Finally, nothing in these books contains any teaching that conflicts with other parts of Holy Scripture. When they are examined, their teachings match up perfectly with the rest of Scripture.

Therefore, the totality of the evidence shows that each of the twenty-seven books which is presently found in the New Testament belongs there. Of this, there is no doubt.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 17

What Can We Conclude About The New Testament Canon?

Since the New Testament completes the written revelation of God to the human race, it is important that we know which books belong in the New Testament canon. After looking at the evidence, there are a number of important conclusions that we can make with respect to the canon of the New Testament. They are as follows:

1. The Twenty-Seven Books Are The Only Divinely Inspired Writings

From an historical point of view, it is clear that the present twenty-seven books of the New Testament are the only books that have been divinely inspired by God and recognized by the people of God. This is a fact of history. There is no doubting this.

We have no examples of books that were first rejected by a large majority of the believers and then later included into the canon. Neither do we find any examples of books that were left out of the New Testament that have any claim to be placed within. The canon of Scripture is complete.

2. The Church Was Diligent In Investigating The Authority Of The Books

The issue of the canon of Scripture was something that believers took seriously. From the time the New Testament documents were first written, believers used discernment to recognize the divine from the human—the true from the false. For example, we find Paul himself giving a sign of authentication by affixing his signature to the end of his letters. It was important to them to know which books had God's divine authority behind them.

3. There Was A Marvelous Unity Among Believers

We also find that there was a marvelous unity among those who believed in Jesus with respect to which books belonged in the New Testament. There was immediate agreement on most of the books; only a few were ever questioned. These particular books that caused some uncertainty were carefully examined and eventually recognized as Holy Scripture by all believers.

We should not exaggerate the significance of the length of time it took to accept these books or the amount of disagreement among believers on this issue.

4. No Individual Or Council Made The Final Determination

As we have repeatedly emphasized, there was no council, organization, or individual who collected the various books and made an authoritative

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determination on which ones belonged and which did not. The recognition of the canon was a long and gradual process. It could not have been otherwise.

These factors show that believers can have supreme confidence that the New Testament which we have today is the same New Testament that the Lord originally gave to the human race; no more and no less.

Summary To Question 17

What Can We Conclude About The New Testament Canon?

There are a number of concluding points that we can make about the New Testament canon of Scripture.

First, the evidence is clear that the twenty-seven books that make up the New Testament have been recognized and used by the church from the beginning. They are the only written works that God has divinely inspired during this time in history.

We also note that the church realized the importance of publicly reading and studying the doctrine, or teaching, which derived from the Lord. Safeguards were taken to make certain that no false teaching was promoted.

There is also the fact that the believers, for the most part, were in agreement as to which books belonged and which did not. While some writings were received by a limited number of people in small geographical areas for a short period of time, eventually, they realized these works did not constitute Holy Scripture.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the believers merely recognized the authority that was in these writings from the moment they were composed. Humans recognized God's divine Word but they did not authorize it or give it any special status. The divine status was already there.

We do not find any individual, church council, or organization providing the final word on this issue for it was God Himself who determined the New Testament canon. Consequently, we can be confident that we have today the exact extent of what He revealed to the human race with nothing added and nothing missing.

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The New Testament Apocrypha Books That Don't Belong In The New Testament

The New Testament consists of twenty-seven separate documents that God divinely inspired and gave to the human race. They are the only sacred writings that were composed during this period of human history. However, a number of other writings also appeared, which were not part of the New Testament, that claimed some sort of authority.

After the New Testament period, various written works appeared that claimed to have been composed by a New Testament character. Other writings emerged that claimed to give authoritative information about leading characters of the New Testament. These include gospels, letters, Acts, and apocalypses; the same type of writings that are found in the New Testament.

Some of these writings were received as authoritative for a short period of time by a small number of believers. Eventually, they were rejected by everyone. In this section of the book, we will look at certain of these written works, the New Testament Apocrypha.

A study of the New Testament Apocrypha will make it clear that they have no such claim whatsoever to divine authority. The contrast between these works, and the written New Testament, will be obvious.

We will conclude this section of our book by noting why we can be assured that we do have the correct books in the Bible. All of the evidence indicates that no books have been incorrectly added to Scripture and no divinely inspired books have been left out.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 18

What Is The New Testament Apocrypha?

The word “apocrypha” actually refers to two different collections of books. One of them is Jewish and the other collection is Christian. It is important that we understand the distinction.

There were a number of books written after the Old Testament period, 1400-400 B.C., which have had some sort of authority claimed for them. Though rejected by the Jews and Jesus, some Christians believe these works should be part of the Old Testament canon. These books are known as the Old Testament Apocrypha. Some people, when they use the word “apocrypha” are referring to this special group of writings.

However, we also find apocryphal books written after the New Testament period. Certain of these works had some type of authority claimed for them for a limited period of time while others were always rejected by the church. These particular writings are known as the New Testament Apocrypha. A number of points about the New Testament Apocrypha should be noted.

1. The New Testament Apocrypha Is Rejected By All Christians

There is one main difference between the Old Testament Apocrypha and the New Testament Apocrypha. The books of the Old Testament Apocrypha have been accepted as canonical by some Christians while the New Testament Apocrypha are rejected as canonical by all believers.

2. Most Were Pseudonymously Written

Most of these apocryphal works were pseudonymously written—the actual writer wrote under the name of a known New Testament character. The fact that the authorship was attributed to a personage who is prominent in the New Testament would give it an instant readership in some circles.

We can make the following observation about the New Testament Apocrypha.

The Apocryphal Writings Used The Same Literary Forms As The New Testament

The writings known as the New Testament Apocrypha can, for the most part, be broken down into four basic literary forms. They are gospels, acts, letters, and apocalypses. These are the same literary forms that the various books of the New Testament have been written.

Therefore, these works copied the style of writing that we find in the New Testament. We can summarize these written works as follows.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

1. The Apocryphal Gospels

To begin with, there were apocryphal gospels. These works contain alleged events and sayings from the life of Jesus Christ. They fall into two general categories.

Some of the writings attempted to fill in the gaps in the life and ministry of Jesus. Basically, they supplement what the four gospels say about Jesus' words and his deeds. The motivation behind these writings was to provide additional information that is not found in the gospels.

However, there were other gospels written that were meant to take the place of the four gospels. These writings attempt to be “the” authoritative work about what Jesus said and did. Those who composed these gospels were not believers in the real Jesus but rather had their own particular viewpoint to put across. Hence, they wrote competing gospels. These competing gospels were meant to replace the canonical gospels.

2. The Apocryphal Acts Of The Apostles

The Acts of the Apostles, the story of the beginning of the early church, also had apocryphal accounts written. The most notable are the Acts of Paul, the Acts of Peter, the Acts of John, the Acts of Andrew, and the Acts of Thomas. These works circulated as a group and received acceptance in some circles. However, there is no reason at all to consider them authentic in any sense of the word.

3. The Apocryphal Letters

A third category of apocryphal works were letters. There were letters that purported to come from one of the New Testament figures.

As is true with the apocryphal gospels and acts, these letters were not written by the alleged author. The apocryphal letters were fewer in number than the apocryphal gospels, acts, and apocalypses because of the difficulty of making the letter look and sound authentic.

4. The Apocryphal Apocalypses

The Book of Revelation is known as an apocalypse—a work that unveils what will happen in the future. In the early church, there were a number of apocryphal apocalypses that circulated. Most notably were ones which were falsely attributed to Peter and Paul.

Again, these works were not written by biblical characters but rather were forgeries.

These four categories sum up the works known as the New Testament Apocrypha. While these writings are not taken seriously by Bible believers, unfortunately, there are unbelievers who attempt to give some status to these documents. Yet, there are no historical reasons for doing this.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Summary To Question 18 **What Is The New Testament Apocrypha?**

There are two collections of apocryphal books that have come down to us—the Old Testament Apocrypha and the New Testament Apocrypha. The first collection was written by Jews while the second collection was written by Christians or those who had their own unique understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus—the New Testament Apocrypha.

The books that we call the New Testament Apocrypha, for the most part, are written in the same literary style as the New Testament. Therefore, we find gospels, acts, letters, and apocalypses. Thus, we find the desire to imitate the sacred writings.

While some of the Old Testament apocryphal books have been received as authoritative by some Christians this is not true with respect to the New Testament. None of the New Testament Apocrypha have been accepted by any of the major branches of Christianity. Everyone realizes the lack of divine authority behind these writings.

However, this has not stopped unbelievers from attempting to equate these writings with the New Testament documents. Indeed, there are some today who give certain of these works equal or greater respect than they do the New Testament documents. Yet, there are no good reasons for doing this.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 19

What Are Some Of The Important Apocryphal Gospels?

The life and ministry of Jesus Christ is recorded for us by four independent witnesses—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They are the only accurate, authentic testimony that we have concerning what Jesus said and did.

However, we know that at an early date, a number of accounts of Jesus' life and ministry were circulating. We can make the following observations.

1. There Were Other Gospels Circulating Early

That there were a number of false gospels which circulated at an early date is documented in the Gospel of Luke. He tells us of other gospels that were circulating at his time. Luke writes:

Many people have tried to tell the story of what God has done among us. They wrote what we had been told by the ones who were there in the beginning and saw what happened. So I made a careful study of everything and then decided to write and tell you exactly what took place. Honorable Theophilus, I have done this to let you know the truth about what you have heard (Luke 1:1-4 CEV).

From his prologue, we note that many had already undertaken to write about Jesus. Luke tells us that his aim was to tell the “exact truth.” We are not certain of the motivation of the authors who wrote these other gospels, or how accurate their accounts of Jesus may have been.

Indeed, believers were warned to beware of lives of Jesus that were inaccurate. We find both Jesus and Paul warning of such false accounts.

2. Jesus Warned Of False Christs Who Would Appear

Jesus warned about “false Christ's.” We read about this in the Gospel of Matthew:

Many will come using my name. They will say, I am the Messiah, and they will deceive many people. “You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. Don't be alarmed! These things must happen, but they don't mean that the end has come (Matthew 24:5,6 God's Word).

These false Christs brought a message contrary to that of Jesus. The message of the false Christs would be written in false gospels. Consequently, we have the warning of Jesus that false Christs would appear and actually deceive many.

3. There Was Also A False Gospel Being Preached

Indeed, Paul also warned of false Christs and a false gospel. He wrote the following to the church at Corinth:

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I am as concerned about you as God is. You were like a virgin bride I had chosen only for Christ. But now I fear that you will be tricked, just as Eve was tricked by that lying snake. I am afraid that you might stop thinking about Christ in an honest and sincere way. We told you about Jesus, and you received the Holy Spirit and accepted our message. But you let some people tell you about another Jesus. Now you are ready to receive another spirit and accept a different message (2 Corinthians 11:2-4 CEV).

The Apostle Paul was aware of people who preached an incorrect message about Jesus. These people were preaching “another Jesus.” Therefore, we should not be surprised to find evidence of such false gospels.

Paul also warned the Galatians against a false gospel. He wrote:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! (Galatians 1:6-8 NRSV).

Even at this early date in the history of the church, a false gospel was spreading.

Some Of The Popular False Gospels That Appeared

There were many false gospels that appeared in the early years of the church. This is a fact of history. They can be placed into two different categories. First, there were works which wanted to take the place of the four gospels, and second, there were those writings which wanted to add to our knowledge of Jesus.

Thus, some of these gospels were attempting to fill in missing information while others were attempting to give the “real” story about Jesus.

The False Gospels Are Not Anonymous

Interestingly, while the four gospels are anonymous, in the sense that the name of the writer is not contained in the text, the apocryphal gospels all claim to have been written by an apostle or other eyewitness to the events of Jesus’ life.

Since the name of an apostle, or some other important figure, was attached to these apocryphal gospels, it was necessary for Christian leaders to speak out against them.

For convenience sake, we can categorize these false gospels as follows.

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The Gnostic Gospels

The Gnostics, who were early opponents of Christianity, believed in “secret” knowledge. A number of gospels came from Gnostic sources, or at least showed Gnostic tendencies.

Consequently, these Gnostic gospels attempted to take the place of the four gospels as authoritative depictions of the words and deeds of Christ.

Some of the more prominent Gnostic gospels include the following.

The Gospel Of Thomas

One of the earliest works that presented a Jesus different from the one that we find in the New Testament was the Gospel of Thomas. Interestingly, there was more than one work that circulated in the early church with the title, “The Gospel of Thomas.”

The one under consideration here consists of over one hundred sayings that were purportedly made by Jesus. There is no historical setting for any of these sayings. Some of them are similar to those found in the four gospels while others are absurd. For example, saying 114 reads as follows:

Simon Peter said to them: “Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life” Jesus said: “Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who make herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Gnostic nature of this work is evident though some argue that this is not necessarily a Gnostic work.

The Gospel Of Peter

Peter is one of the most prominent characters in the New Testament. In the early years of the church, a number of false works were written that were attributed to him. The Gospel of Peter is one of them.

This Gnostic work has Jesus remaining silent as He was on the cross as though He did not suffer any pain. In addition, His cry of agony has been re-worded to read as follows:

My power, my power, you have left me.

This is consistent with the secret teachings of the Gnostics. The Gospel of Peter also records the words of the “talking cross.”

The Gospel Of Mary

Mary, the mother of Jesus had a gospel named after her. This one also showed Gnostic tendencies. Though supposedly the story of Mary, it does

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not show familiarity with the customs and geography of the Holy Land. This work has no basis in fact.

The Gospel Of The Egyptians

Written around the middle of the second century, this document promotes unbiblical doctrines such as the rejection of marriage. Interestingly, it was accepted in some parts of Egypt as canonical. Some of the sayings in this gospel attempt to eliminate the distinction between male and female. As is true with these other apocryphal gospels, the unbiblical nature of the content is obvious.

Gospels That Attempted To Supplement The New Testament

There were another group of gospels that were written by those who were believers, or at least sympathetic toward Christianity. Instead of trying to replace the four gospels, they added details to supplement them.

Some of the most prominent are the following.

The Infancy Gospel Of Thomas

This is not the same as the “Gospel of Thomas.” This particular work gives details of the life of Jesus from age five through twelve. It fills in the silent years before Jesus’ famous exchange with the elders in the temple. In this work, the child Jesus performs a number of miracles—some of them bordering on the absurd.

The Gospel To The Hebrews

An early work that circulated in the church was known as the Gospel to the Hebrews. While this work is referred to by a number of early church writers, no copy of it has survived. We are only left with quotations from it in the writings of early Christians.

Most likely written in the middle of the second century, this Jewish-Christian gospel was in use until the fourth century. It seems to have been originally written in either Hebrew or Aramaic.

One statement that has been preserved has the Holy Spirit taking Jesus by His hair and then transporting Him to Mount Tabor! In another place, this work records a conversation of Jesus with His brother James after the resurrection.

The church never considered this work worthy of being placed in the canon. Indeed, it seems to have been composed about one hundred years after the life of Christ.

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The Protoevangelium Of James

One popular early work was known as the Protoevangelium of James. It tells the story of the early years of Mary—her birth and childhood. It also records here eventual marriage to Joseph.

According to this account, Joseph was a widower who had a number of children. Consequently, the virginity of Mary can be upheld after she gave birth to Jesus. This account also records details surrounding the birth of Jesus in a cave. Though popular in some circles, its factual basis is suspect.

The Gospel Of Nicodemus (Acts Of Pilate)

This work is known by two names: “the Gospel of Nicodemus” and the “Acts of Pilate.” It claims to give details of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate as well as Jesus’ descent into the unseen world after His death. Again, there is no basis for believing anything contained in this work is authentic.

Fragments From An Unknown Gospel (Egerton Papyrus 2)

In the middle of the twentieth century some papyrus fragments were published that contain parts of an “unknown gospel.” This is also known as “Egerton papyrus 2.” This work has been dated to the first part of the second century A.D. (from A.D. 110 to 130).

Three of the fragments have stories that parallel the gospels while another fragment contains a story of Jesus performing a miracle on the banks of the Jordan River. This particular miracle is not recorded in the New Testament.

None Of These Gospels Have Anything Authoritative To Say To Us

This is just a small sampling of the many apocryphal gospels that were written and circulating during the early years of the church. As mentioned, they were written to either supplement the New Testament account of Jesus or to take the place of the four gospels. As we have noted, none of these apocryphal gospels has any real claim to authority.

Summary To Question 19: What Are Some Of The Important Apocryphal Gospels?

The good news of Jesus Christ, as found in the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the only authoritative works we possess about the life and ministry of Jesus.

Yet, a number of accounts of Jesus’ life and ministry appeared soon after His ascension into heaven. These books were composed and became popular because people wanted as much information as possible about Jesus.

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The gospels are only selective in what they tell us about Him and only contain a small fraction of His words and deeds. Consequently, these works filled in the blanks.

Some of the more popular false gospels were the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, and the Gospel of Mary. They attempted to take the place of the four gospels in the minds of the people.

Other gospels had different purposes in mind. Basically, it seems that their intent was to fill in the gaps of the life and ministry of Jesus that is not found in the New Testament.

While these works have no historical basis whatsoever and can add nothing to our knowledge of Jesus and His ministry, they still were popular with large numbers of people.

Though it is possible that some of them may contain authentic elements of Jesus' sayings and deeds, there is no way for us to determine the degree they have accurately reflected Jesus.

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Question 20

What Caused The Apocryphal Gospels To Be Written?

We know that there were a number of apocryphal gospels which were written. They either added to, or took away from, the content of the four canonical gospels. A number of questions naturally arise.

First, it is fair to ask, why were these apocryphal gospels written and circulated? What made people compose them and others receive them as truthful?

There are a number of reasons as to why they arose and would receive some degree of acceptance among Bible believers. They can be listed as follows.

1. Jesus Did Many Other Things That Were Not Recorded

One motivation of apocryphal gospels was to fill in the gaps in the life and ministry of Jesus. We know from the New Testament itself that the things written about Jesus were only selective.

For example, John said that the things he wrote down about the life of Jesus were only selective of what He said and did. He wrote the following:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of His disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing you may have life in His name (John 20:30,31 CSB).

John also said that Jesus did many more things than he recorded. He wrote:

This disciple is the one who told all of this. He wrote it, and we know he is telling the truth. Jesus did many other things. If they were all written in books, I don't suppose there would be room enough in the whole world for all the books (John 21:24,25 CEV).

These types of statements would lend themselves to people filling in some of the gaps. Perhaps people had actually heard stories about Jesus that they believed were credible. Since believers wanted to know everything that they could about Jesus, this would motivate their publication.

2. The Silent Years Of Jesus Needed Filling In

There is also the fact of the silent years of Jesus. Except for one recorded incident when He was twelve, we know nothing of anything that He said or did until He was about thirty years of age.

Consequently, there is the opportunity to fill in these silent years with imaginative stories about the child Jesus. This is exactly what occurred.

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3. The Time Between Jesus' Death And Resurrection Was Of Interest

Another area of interest for the writers of apocryphal gospels was the time between Jesus death on the cross, and His resurrection from the dead. There was curiosity about what happened to Jesus during this time. This lent itself to the composition of a number of stories to fill in the details.

4. The Time Between Jesus Resurrection And Ascension Was Of Interest

There was also interest in the time between Jesus resurrection and His ascension into heaven. The Bible speaks of this period as follows:

After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3 NRSV).

Jesus appeared to a number of people in those days. The New Testament does not give us much detail concerning what He said. This caused certain people to fill in those details which the New Testament does not provide.

5. Jesus Told Certain People Not To Tell What He Did

Finally, we also find Jesus telling certain people not tell others about certain things which He had done. For example, after He was transfigured in front of three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, He told them not to tell what had happened. We read about this in the Gospel of Matthew:

As they descended the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen until I, the Son of Man, have been raised from the dead" (Matthew 17:9 NLT).

The idea that Jesus told people not to tell anyone about certain events in His life until after His resurrection provided the motivation to write fanciful stories and attribute them to Jesus. The writers could contend that these words and deeds actually occurred but the people were instructed by Jesus not to tell anyone at that time. They had to wait until after His resurrection.

These are a few of the factors that lead individuals to compose apocryphal works about the life and ministry of Jesus.

Summary To Question 20: What Caused The Apocryphal Gospels To Be Written?

The rise of the apocryphal gospels can be attributed to a number of factors.

First, the New Testament itself says that it is only selective about what it teaches. Furthermore, it emphasizes that Jesus did many more things than are recorded in the Scripture.

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There is also the issue of Jesus silent years. Until the age of thirty, we know practically nothing about what Jesus said or did.

There is also interest about what happened to Jesus after His death but before He appeared to people as the risen Savior. In addition, the appearances of the risen Christ would also be a subject of interest. What did He say when he appeared to His disciples?

Finally, there are instances in the New Testament, when Jesus told people not to tell others what He had done. The transfiguration of Jesus, for example, was not to be revealed until after His resurrection. This would lead to speculation about further events which occurred in the life of Christ which were not to be revealed until after He came back from the dead.

In short, there are a number of reasons as to why people would wish to write apocryphal stories about Jesus.

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Question 21

What Are Some Of The Important Apocryphal Acts Of The Apostles?

In the early years of the church, there circulated a number of “Acts of the Apostles” that gave an apocryphal or fictitious accounts of the lives of some of the prominent figures in the early church. These “Acts:” can be categorized as “Christian fiction” or works with Gnostic tendencies. Gnosticism was an early heresy that emphasized “secret” or “hidden” teachings of the Lord.

The five most notable among the apocryphal Acts are the Acts of Peter, the Acts of Thomas, the Acts of Andrew, the Acts of John, and the Acts of Paul. We can briefly summarize their contents as follows.

1. The Acts Of Peter

The Acts of Peter was originally composed in Greek; probably around A.D. 150. However, the majority of the text has survived only in the Latin translation.

The Acts of Peter deal with the last part of the life of Peter. It tells how he came to Rome and was martyred for his faith in Jesus Christ. The document also reports a renewed confrontation with Simon Magus—the sorcerer whom Peter had formerly confronted in Samaria (Acts 8). The tradition of Peter being crucified upside down is found in an early Greek manuscript of this work.

In the Acts of Peter, he performs many miracles; this includes such things as causing dogs to talk. In addition, we are told that Peter not only brought people back from the dead, he also brought back to life a dead fish which had been hung in a window! This work is usually placed in the category of Christian fiction. It is easy to see why this is so.

2. The Acts Of Paul

Another work of Christian fiction is the “Acts of Paul.” The man who wrote this fictitious account was an elder in one of the churches in Asia. He was removed from his position as elder for composing this piece of Christian fiction though he claimed to have written it “out of his love for Paul.”

The Acts of Paul contains a well-known section called The Acts of Paul and Thecla. According to the account, Thecla was supposedly a young woman from Iconium who was converted under Paul’s ministry as recorded in the Book of Acts (Acts 14:1-7).

After her conversion, she then broke her engagement, and joined Paul in missionary work. According to the text, she baptized herself by throwing herself into a ditch filled with water. Eventually Paul sent her back home

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to teach the Word of God. This text associates a number of prophetesses with Paul and his ministry.

One amusing story concerns the Apostle Paul and his encounter with a lion. This fanciful story tells us that Paul preached to a lion in the wilderness around Ephesus. The lion was converted and was then baptized!

Later, when Paul was taken to the amphitheater in Ephesus to be thrown to the lions, we are told that the lion who was sent out to kill him was actually the same one that Paul baptized! Consequently, Paul was able to miraculously escape death.

This work also chronicles Paul's martyrdom—he was beheaded under Caesar Nero.

According to the early church father Tertullian, who had an earlier form of the text of this work than we presently possess, Thecla actually baptized others. People were citing this work to argue that women should baptize; something Tertullian strongly opposed.

However, the text of this work that has survived to our day only says she baptized herself. There is no record of her baptizing others.

One note on this work that is of some interest is that this work contains a physical description of Paul. In this work, Paul is described as a small man with a bald head, crooked legs, with wide eyebrows and a prominent nose. There is no way of knowing whether or not this is an accurate physical description of Paul.

3. The Acts Of Thomas

The Acts of Thomas give the account of Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, as he was on his way to India to preach the gospel. This is a Gnostic work that has no historical basis whatsoever.

Contained within the text of the Acts of Thomas is a famous poem called, "the Hymn of the Pearl." This poem, it seems, was added later to the original Acts of Thomas.

4. The Acts Of John

The Acts of John contains a number of stories about the life of John. Like the Acts of Thomas, it is a Gnostic work without any factual foundation. Among other things, it tells the story of Jesus and His disciples performing a dance to a Gnostic hymn! While these other apocryphal Acts have the main character martyred, John is spared martyrdom in the "Acts of John."

5. The Acts Of Andrew

The Acts of Andrew provides a number of apocryphal anecdotes in the life of the Apostle Andrew—the brother of Simon Peter. His martyrdom by

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crucifixion is recorded in this work. As is true with these other works, there is no basis in fact of what is written in the document.

These Works Circulated As A Unit

These five apocryphal Acts actually circulated as a unit among a group known as Manicheans. These writings were singled out by name, along with other heretical books, in a sixth century decree, known as the “Gelesian Decree.”

The Gelesian Decree also made clear the identity of the authentic New Testament books—these books were not among them.

They Are Characterized By Three Common Things

These Apocryphal Acts are characterized by a number of regular features. They include these three common themes.

First, there is the promotion of celibacy in these various “Acts.” This includes celibacy between husbands and wives!

Second, each of these works contain numerous miracles. Some of these miracle stories are absurd. This includes the story in the Acts of Paul of the lion whom Paul baptized after the lion was converted as well as the account of the resurrected fish, which was given in the Acts of Peter. Nothing more needs to be said.

Finally, martyrdom is glorified in these works. The Acts of Peter relates how Peter was crucified upside down and the Acts of Paul tell the story of the Apostle Paul being beheaded. Only John escaped martyrdom.

This briefly sums up these apocryphal acts which were circulating at an early date in the church. While giving us some insight into the stories circulating at this time, these “acts” do not provide us with much, if any, historical information about these biblical characters.

Summary To Question 21:

What Are Some Of The Important Apocryphal Acts Of The Apostles?

There were a number of attempts to compose acts of notable New Testament characters. These include Andrew, Paul, Peter, John, and Thomas. None of these “Acts” have any basis in fact.

Some of them fall into the category of Christian fiction while others have definite Gnostic tendencies. Whether they may contain certain elements of truth about the main character is still debated. The common themes of celibacy, martyrdom, and numerous miraculous deeds run through these works. They were all denounced by church authorities as works that should not be read in the churches. The reasons are rather obvious.

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Question 22

What Are Some Of The Important Apocryphal Letters?

The largest part of the New Testament is made up of letters; twenty-one out of the twenty-seven books are letters to either churches or individuals. In contrast to this, the apocryphal letters make up the smallest percentage of writings that were attributed to a New Testament character.

While a number of false gospels and Acts circulated, it was much more difficult to falsify a letter from a prominent New Testament figure. Therefore, the number of the apocryphal letters that were written is fewer than the number of false gospels or Acts.

The New Testament shows an awareness of false letters circulating in the name of an apostle. It seems that there were attempts to forge letters of the Apostle Paul. He wrote the following to the church at Thessalonica:

And now . . . let us tell you about the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ and how we will be gathered together to meet him. Please don't be so easily shaken and troubled by those who say that the day of the Lord has already begun. Even if they claim to have had a vision, a revelation, or a letter supposedly from us, don't believe them (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 NLT).

This may indicate that false letters were circulating at this early time.

Some Apocryphal Letters

Some of the prominent apocryphal letters include the following.

1. The Third Letter To The Corinthians

One of the apocryphal letters that circulated was Third Corinthians. This is found in the work known as the "Acts of Paul." The Armenian Church held it in high esteem and actually included it in the appendix of a particular edition of the New Testament.

The Third Letter to the Corinthians attempts to correct certain misunderstandings which occurred with the prior letters written to the church at Corinth; First and Second Corinthians.

In particular, this work seeks to correct the misinterpretation of Paul's statement, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." Some people took this to mean that the resurrection of the dead was not physical. Indeed, the Gnostics were fond of quoting this part of First Corinthians in their effort to deny a bodily resurrection. Third Corinthians corrects this misunderstanding of the text.

It is believed that Christians felt the need to forge Third Corinthians to counter the claims of the Gnostics. Of course, all this was not necessary.

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What was necessary was to have a complete understanding about the teaching of the New Testament concerning the resurrection body.

2. The Letter To The Laodiceans

Paul's mention of a letter from the Laodiceans prompted a number of attempts to compose such a work. In his letter to the Colossians, he wrote the following:

After you have read this letter, read it in the church at Laodicea. Make sure that you also read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16 God's Word).

We know nothing of this letter from Laodicea except from this reference. In fact, it is debated as to whether this letter was written by Paul to the Laodiceans or that it was another letter of his.

It is possible that Paul was referring to his letter to the Ephesians, which was circulating and was, at that time, in Laodicea. If this was the case, then Paul was instructing the Colossians to send for another of his letters to have it read in the churches—the letter to the Ephesians.

Because of the ambiguous way in which the verse was written, it can be understood either way. While it has been assumed to be a letter written by Paul that was sent to the Laodiceans, there are those who have contended that the letter originated from Laodicea.

And a letter from Laodicea had indeed appeared! This letter to the Laodiceans consists of about twenty verses which are taken from a number of Paul's letters.

This patchwork document does not show much creativity. Though obviously not one of Paul's writings, it remained highly valued for a number of years in the church.

3. The Letter Of The Apostles

This letter is addressed to the churches of the East and the West. Its existence was unknown until a copy of the text was found in the year 1895.

It is an attack on Gnosticism by an orthodox believer. It begins with the eleven apostles giving a description of various miracles of Jesus that He performed throughout His life. Then Jesus responds to questions from His disciples concerning the time of His Second Coming, the last judgment, the fate of the lost, and the resurrection of the body.

The work concludes with a description of Jesus' Ascension into heaven accompanied by an earthquake, thunder and lightning. This document shows familiarity with much of the New Testament.

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While no one actually believes it was written by the apostles, it seems to have been written by an orthodox believer; that is one who held to the New Testament teachings about Christ.

These three examples provide us with an idea of the kind of documents that were circulating in the early years of the church that claimed to be actual letters from the apostles.

Summary To Question 22 What Are Some Of The Important Apocryphal New Testament Letters?

It seems that at the time of the apostles, there were a number of false letters circulating. This continued in the early years of the church after the death of the last of the apostles.

While not as popular as false gospels, there were indeed some false letters that circulated in the early church. Some of the more prominent include “3rd Corinthians,” the “Letter to the Laodiceans,” and the “Letter to the Apostles.”

Each of these works circulated among the believers in the early years of the church and have had those who accepted their authenticity. Yet there is no reason to believe that they are authentic.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 23

What Are Some Of The Important Apocryphal Apocalypses?

The Book of Revelation is called an “apocalypse.” This means a writing which is an unveiling of the future. As there is a divine apocalypse revealed in Holy Scripture there were also a number of apocryphal apocalypses which were composed. They include the following.

1. The Apocalypse Of Peter

There was a work which widely circulated in the early church under the title of “the Apocalypse of Peter.” Though attributed to the apostle, it was not composed by him. In this work, we find graphic descriptions of the punishments of hell, or the lake of fire.

Interestingly, in contrast to the Book of Revelation, with its emphasis on Jesus Christ the Savior overcoming evil, the Apocalypse of Peter embarks on descriptions of different classes of sinners as well as their punishment.

2. The Apocalypse Of Paul

The Apocalypse of Paul is a very badly put together book which seems to have been written rather late in the history of the church—at the end of the fourth century.

In this document, we have a detailed description of Paul’s visit to the third heaven as noted by him in his second letter to the Corinthians. Interestingly, Paul himself said that he was not allowed to divulge any of the details of what occurred. He wrote the following to the Corinthians:

But I do know that I was caught up into paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be told (2 Corinthians 12:4 NLT).

Yet, this did not stop some writer from filling in the details that Paul himself would not give.

This apocryphal apocalypse also presents vivid descriptions of the punishments that sinners will receive in hell. This work attempts to specify the punishments the wicked would receive.

For instance, we are told that those who have blasphemed will have their tongues hung over a blazing fire! It seems that this work borrowed some of its content from the earlier Apocalypse of Peter—especially in the section on the torments of hell.

Neither the Apocalypse of Peter nor the Apocalypse of Paul was written by the supposed author. In addition, nothing in these writings remotely suggests any type of divine insight into the various punishments, or degrees of punishment, the wicked will receive. God has given us one divinely inspired apocalypse—the Book of Revelation. We need no others.

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Summary To Question 23

What Are Some Of The Important Apocryphal Apocalypses?

As was true with apocryphal gospels, acts, and letters, there were also apocryphal apocalypses that were written and circulated. These works, like the Book of Revelation, spoke of future events. Two of the more prominent were works attributed to Peter and Paul.

Neither of these works was written by the biblical characters, and neither of these works has content that is biblical. Instead of centering on Jesus Christ and His victory over evil, these works emphasize the various punishments the wicked will receive from God. It is understandable why these works were not really taken seriously by the church of Jesus Christ.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 24

Were There Some Divinely Authoritative Writings That Were Not Included In Holy Scripture? (Other Letters From Paul)

Apparently yes. There seems to be some writings of the apostles that were not placed in Scripture. These writings would have carried their apostolic authority, which, in turn, carried Jesus' authority. The evidence is as follows.

1. There May Have Been A Letter Written Before First Corinthians

Paul seemingly spoke of a previous letter that he had written to the Corinthians. He wrote the following to the believers in Corinth:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons (1 Corinthians 5:9 NRSV).

It is argued that this letter was composed before Paul wrote the book of First Corinthians. Since the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to a church in his position as an Apostle, it would have been considered divinely authoritative.

However, this is not the only possible way to understand this verse. Paul may have been referring to the letter they were reading—First Corinthians. If this is the case, then there is no lost letter.

2. There Seem To Be Other Letters From Paul To The Corinthians That Are Not Found In Scripture

There is another reference in the writings of Paul to a previous letter. We read the following in Second Corinthians:

And I wrote this very thing to you, so that when I came I would not have sadness from those who ought to make me rejoice, since I am confident in you all that my joy would be yours. For out of great distress and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears, not to make you sad, but to let you know the love that I have especially for you (2 Corinthians 2:3,4 NET).

This may refer to a letter written to the Corinthian church after First Corinthians, but before Second Corinthians. Consequently, there may have been correspondence by Paul to the Corinthian church between the time he wrote these two letters that are now part of Scripture—First and Second Corinthians. We also read:

For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it (though I did regret it, for I see that I grieved you with that letter, though only briefly) (2 Corinthians 7:8 NRSV).

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Again, this may refer to an unknown letter.

3. There May Have Been An Earlier Letter To The Philippians

Paul may have written an earlier letter to the church at Philippi. In the letter that is now part of Scripture, we read the following:

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard (Philippians 3:1 NRSV).

Some see this as a reference to a previous letter to the Philippians rather than a reference to the same letter that he was in the process of writing.

4. Other Traditions Are Mentioned By The Apostle Paul

Paul also mentioned another letter that he had written to the Thessalonians. We read about this in Second Thessalonians. He said:

Therefore, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold on to the traditions that we taught you, whether by speech or by letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15 NET).

Most likely this refers to First Thessalonians. However, it is possible that it could refer to another letter.

5. Paul Spoke Of A Letter To The Laodiceans

There is also a letter that Paul wrote to the Laodiceans. This is another unknown writing of Paul. He wrote to the Colossians about this letter:

And after you have read this letter, have it read to the church of Laodicea. In turn, read the letter from Laodicea as well (Colossians 4:16 NET).

Some, however, see this as a reference to the letter to the Ephesians. There is some evidence that Ephesians was originally a circular letter. Ephesus was only one of the places which the letter was addressed. There is also the fact that when the heretic Marcion drew up his list of Paul's letters he titled Ephesians, "Paul's Letter to the Laodiceans."

6. Not Everything That God Said Was Recorded In Scripture

Something else needs to be noted. Not every divine word that God gave to humanity was recorded in Scripture. There were many things that the Jesus taught, or that the apostles preached, that were divinely authoritative but, for some reason, have not been recorded in Scripture.

John alluded to some of these things that Jesus taught. He wrote:

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Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples that are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30,31 NIV).

He also said:

There are many other things that Jesus did. If every one of them were written down, I suppose the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:25 NIV).

From these statements of John, we understand that only a small portion of the words and deeds of Jesus were recorded for us.

7. Paul Gives Us An Unknown Saying Of Jesus

We know of at least one saying of Jesus that was not preserved in the four gospels but is found in the Book of Acts. The Apostle Paul said the following:

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35 NIV).

This illustrates that what we find in Scripture is highly selective.

8. That Which Is Found In Scripture Was Purposefully Preserved

Consequently, to become part of Holy Scripture, a work of an Apostle must have been purposefully preserved. Why certain apostolic letters to churches, if indeed they were written, were not preserved is not known. It would be fruitless for us to speculate as to why this is so.

Summary To Question 24

Were There Some Divinely Authoritative Writings That Were Not Included In Holy Scripture? (Other Letters From Paul)

There seems to be a few letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to churches that, for whatever reason, were not collected and placed in the New Testament canon.

This includes a previous letter that he wrote to the Corinthians before First Corinthians, a letter that he wrote after First Corinthians, but before Second Corinthians, and a letter he wrote to the Laodiceans. There is also the possibility of an earlier letter that he wrote to the Philippians, as well as a letter to the Thessalonians.

However, the existence of all of these "lost letters" is by no means certain. The statement in First Corinthians could refer to that same letter. In addition, the letter to the Laodiceans may refer to the letter to the Ephesians. There is not enough evidence to be certain.

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We do know that there were a number of things that Jesus said and did, as well as certain things the apostles said and did, that were not recorded for us in Scripture, or anywhere else for that matter.

Consequently, there had to be some type of effort to preserve the writings of the Apostles that became Holy Scripture. If there were other writings by the Apostles that did not become part of the New Testament canon, then we have no knowledge as to why they were not included.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

Question 25

Were There Local Canons In The Early Years Of The Church?

In the early years of the New Testament church, there would have been local canons, or lists of authoritative Scripture, that represented the usage of a particular geographical area. As the Scripture was copied and circulated throughout the Roman Empire, certain areas would not have received copies of all of the present New Testament books.

Indeed, the New Testament was written over a period of perhaps forty years or more. This, of necessity, would have certain churches having an incomplete canon.

The evidence for these local canons can possibly be seen in a number of ways.

1. Paul's Letters Circulated As A Collection

We know that a collection of the letters of Paul circulated at an early date. Peter wrote:

And regard the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as also our dear brother Paul wrote to you, according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of these things in all his letters. Some things in these letters are hard to understand, things the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they also do to the rest of the scriptures (2 Peter 3:15,16 NET).

We do not know the exact identity of the books that were in this collection of Paul's writings—only that it was a collection.

Paul may have been referring to these books when he wrote the following to Timothy:

When you come, bring with you the cloak I left in Troas with Carpas and the scrolls, especially the parchment ones (2 Timothy 4:13 NET).

The scroll may refer to the Old Testament scrolls, or to his own writings. We just do not know.

Whatever the case may be, we do know that certain churches would have had a collection of Paul's writings at an early date.

2. The Seven Churches Of Asia Were To Have A Copy Of The Book Of Revelation

We know that the seven churches of Asia Minor were to have copies of the Book of Revelation. We read the following command in the first chapter of Revelation:

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I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, saying: "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches—to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea" (Revelation 1:10,11 NET).

These seven churches would have had, at least, a copy of Revelation. Beyond that, we do not know which of the other New Testament books they possessed.

3. Some Churches May Have Been Using Non-Canonical Books

There is something else. These congregations may also have had, for a short period of time, other writings that they considered to be helpful, but were not on the same level as the canonical books. The evidence for this is as follows.

Two of the most ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament that still exist, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus, contain books that are not part of the New Testament.

Codex Sinaiticus, copied about A.D. 350, contains the Shepherd of Hermas and the Letter of Barnabas. Codex Alexandrinus, copied about a century later, contains 1 and 2 Clement. None of these four works are part of New Testament Scripture. Their addition in these manuscripts may indicate they were part of a local canon at the time.

However, this is not necessarily the case. One could also argue that these books were copied because they were considered helpful to believers but not necessarily on the same level as Holy Scripture. In fact, these works are placed *after* the canonical books. This may indicate their non-canonical status.

4. The Muratorian Canon Lists Separately Books That Are Not In The Present Canon

The Muratorian Canon is a fragmentary list of New Testament books that were known in Rome around A.D. 200. Within the list there is a distinction made between those that can be read in public worship services and those that should only be read privately.

It has been argued that the Muratorian Canon represented the canon that was held by the church at Rome at this particular time.

As time went on, it became more and more important that each local congregation had the correct contents of the New Testament canon. Discussions about the exact nature of Jesus Christ were conducted as early as the second century. It became obvious that there had to be some sort of authoritative list to appeal to in the various theological issues that would appear.

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Hence, the need for a canon of Scripture was universal among the churches.

Summary To Question 25:

Were There Local Canons In The Early Years Of The Church?

When the New Testament was in the process of being written, the books were copied and circulated among the churches. It is clear that some churches would have copies of more documents than other churches.

We do not really know which church possessed which documents. However, we do know that a collection of the writings of Paul circulated at an early date. We also know that seven churches in Asia Minor would have received a copy of the Book of Revelation.

Some of these local canons may, for a time, have contained books that were not part of the New Testament canon.

From sources like the two ancient Greek manuscripts Alexandrinus and Vaticanus we can determine that by the fourth century some churches eventually received all twenty-seven New Testament documents. It would have taken longer for churches in other geographical areas to obtain the entire New Testament canon.

There is also the possibility that there were some local areas that used books for a certain time which were not part of the divinely inspired New Testament.

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Question 26

Were Certain Books Left Out Of The New Testament Canon?

In the history of the church, there have been certain writings that were given canonical status for a short period of time, and by a small number of people. These works had only limited recognition in certain geographical areas. They are not, “lost Scripture,” or works that were left out of the canon. There is no evidence that they should be included in the New Testament canon.

We can make the following observations about these writings.

There Are Different Reasons As To Why Some Books Were Considered Canonical

There are a number of works have been accepted as part of New Testament Scripture in at least one of the following ways.

1. The Testimony Of An Orthodox Early Church Father

An early church Father, who held to the central beliefs of the Christian faith, testified to its canonical status. For whatever reason, he assumed the writing held some sort of authority.

2. It Is Found In Ancient Greek Manuscripts Of The New Testament

The work is found in at least one of the oldest complete, or nearly complete, Greek manuscript that contained the New Testament. The writing was copied alongside the New Testament books and placed with it.

3. It Is Found In Some Printed Bibles

The work is found in more than one printed Bible. This means that Bible-believers, for some reason, assumed the writing was worthy to be placed with other books of New Testament Scripture.

The Following Books Meet One Of These Criteria

The following works meet at least one of these criteria.

The Letter Of Clement (A.D. 90-100)

In A.D. 95, Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthian church. This is an extremely important work because Clement was the leading elder of the Church of Rome.

He wrote his letter to the Corinthians to end a dispute between the laity and the elders. He was probably the same Clement that Paul mentioned in one of his letters. Paul wrote to the Philippians:

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Yes, I say also to you, true companion, help them. They have struggled together in the gospel ministry along with me and Clement and my other coworkers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:3 NET).

The Message puts it this way:

And, oh, yes, . . . since you're right there to help them work things out, do your best with them. These women worked for the Message hand in hand with Clement and me, and with the other veterans—worked as hard as any of us. Remember, their names are also in the book of life (Philippians 4:3 MsgB).

The Letter of Clement is found at the end of the New Testament books in Codex Alexandrinus (A)—a fifth century Greek manuscript that contains the New Testament as well as parts of the Old Testament.

The church historian Eusebius states that it was read in many churches (Eusebius, *History*, 3.16).

While Clement quotes all of the books of the New Testament with the exception of Philemon, James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John, the book does not claim to possess divine authority. There was never any wide acceptance of this work as part of the New Testament.

The Second Letter of Clement (A.D. 120-140)

This letter was, at one time, attributed to Clement of Rome. However, he is not the author of this document. It is basically the transcription of a sermon. The Second Letter of Clement is found at the end of the New Testament in the Greek manuscript Codex Alexandrinus (A). There is no claim to divine authority within this writing.

The Letter Of Barnabas (First Or Second Century)

The exact date of the Letter of Barnabas is uncertain. It was written to show that Jesus is a fulfillment of the Old Testament law. This work is found in Codex Sinaiticus (aleph) – a fourth century Greek manuscript, as well as the table of contents of Codex Bezae (D) – a sixth century Greek manuscript.

Clement of Alexandria and Origen quoted it as Scripture. The work does not claim divine authority and neither was it written by the Barnabas who is mentioned in the New Testament.

The Shepherd Of Hermas

The Shepherd of Hermas is an early work that some have argued actually belongs in Scripture. This work is found in Codex Sinaiticus (aleph) —a fourth century Greek manuscript as well as the table of contents of Codex Bezae (D)—a sixth century Greek manuscript.

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It is also found in some early Latin translations of the New Testament. The church fathers Origen and Irenaeus quoted it as Scripture. Eusebius said it was read publicly and used for instruction in the churches.

Some have attributed it, to the same Hermas that Paul mentioned in his letter to the Romans. He wrote:

Greet . . . Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them (Romans 16:14 NRSV).

The Muratorian fragment, an early canonical list, said of it:

It ought to be read; but it cannot be publicly read in the church to the people, either among the prophets, since their number is complete, or the apostles till the end of time.

It was realized that this work was not to be considered on the same level as Holy Scripture. There are a number of reasons as to why this is so.

It Is An Allegory

The Shepherd of Hermas is an allegory—similar to John Bunyan’s “A Pilgrims Progress.” While the use of allegory is found in parts of Scripture, there is no complete biblical book that would fit into this literary category.

Furthermore, this work commands a number of things that are actually contradictory to the rest of Scripture. This includes the following teachings.

It Teaches The Necessity Of Penance

In “The Shepherd of Hermas” we find the necessity of doing penance for the forgiveness of sin. This is totally opposed to the teaching of Scripture. Forgiveness of sin occurs the moment one asks for it. Paul wrote:

For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved (Romans 10:9,10 NLT).

This is the biblical teaching on the subject. Forgiveness is complete the moment we ask Christ to be our Savior.

The Holy Spirit Is Wrongly Identified With Jesus

The author seems to identify the Holy Spirit with Jesus Christ before Jesus became a human being. Scripture teaches that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are two distinct Persons—the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity.

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It Has A False Understanding Of The Trinity

The Shepherd of Hermas also teaches that the Trinity came into existence only after Jesus had ascended into heaven. The Bible says that the Trinity has existed eternally.

These teachings make it impossible for this work to be part of Scripture. This was recognized by the Christians. The church father Athanasius wrote:

For the blessed Paul in his Epistle to the Hebrews says, “By faith we understand that the ages were framed by the Word of God, so that which is seen is not made of things which do not appear. But nothing is common to the Word with the ages; for He it is who is in existence before the ages came to be. And in the Shepherd [of Hermas] it is written . . . though it is not of the Canon.

He realized the sub-biblical nature of the work.

The Didache

“The Didache” is the “Teaching of the Twelve.” An unknown author wrote it in either the first or the second century A.D.

Clement of Alexandria quoted it as Scripture, but the church historian Eusebius listed it among the rejected writings. It is not found in any canonical list, neither was it ever translated by those in the early church.

It teaches a number of things that are contradictory to the New Testament. They are as follows.

1. It Has Non-biblical Rules Concerning Baptism

The Didache teaches that a person must fast before being baptized in water. In addition, baptism must take place in running water (7:4). Nothing like this is taught in the New Testament.

2. This Work Says Believers Are To Daily Recite The Lord’s Prayer

Believers are to pray the Lord’s Prayer three times a day (9:1-5).

However, this is just the opposite of what Jesus taught. He warned believers against repeating the same prayers over and over again. Matthew records Jesus saying the following:

When you pray, do not babble repetitiously like the Gentiles, because they think that by their many words they will be heard. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him (Matthew 6:7-8 NET).

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Here we have something teaching exactly the opposite of what Christ taught!

3. The Length Of The Apostles' Stay In A City Contradicts Scripture

According to the Didache, genuine apostles were forbidden to stay in a city for more than two days (11:5).

However, the Apostle Paul stayed and taught in the city of Corinth for eighteen months. We read the following in the Book of Acts:

So Paul stayed for a year and a half; teaching them the word of God (Acts 18:11 NIV).

The New International Version adds the words “in Corinth” to this verse. It reads:

So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half; teaching them the word of God (Acts 18:11 NIV).

This is another clear contradiction between this work, the Didache, and the New Testament.

4. They Are Told Not Test The Prophets

We are also told that genuine prophets, who spoke by means of the Holy Spirit, could not be tested (11:7) However, the Scripture says otherwise:

If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three - should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret (1 Corinthians 14:27 NIV).

Paul also wrote:

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 NRSV).

Again, we have a contradiction between these two works.

5. There Were Certain Days For Believers To Fast

According to the Didache, there were certain days in which believers were to fast. They were Wednesday and Friday. Believers were forbidden to fast on Monday or Thursday (8:1)—the days the religious Jews fasted. However, there is nothing in Scripture that says anything about fasting on certain days.

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6. **There Were Non-biblical Teachings About The Lord's Supper**

There are also some teachings about the Lord's Supper that go beyond what the New Testament says. For example, it says that unbaptized persons could not participate in the Lord's Supper.

In addition, prayers not recorded in the New Testament were given as a pattern for celebrating the Lord's Supper (9:1-5).

Thus, we find that the evidence is clear that the Didache has no place in the New Testament canon.

However, in the Didache we do find this important statement:

You shall not forsake the commandments of the Lord but you shall keep the things received, neither adding nor taking away (Didache 4:13)

This illustrates the importance of knowing the commands of the Lord as well as keeping them. To know the commands of the Lord, it is important to know what sources accurately teach His commands—in other words, a New Testament canon.

The Apocalypse Of Peter (A.D. 150)

This work was mentioned in the table of contents in Codex Bezae. Clement of Alexandria quoted it as Scripture. Although it was widely circulated in the early church, Simon Peter did not write it. It was actually written about one hundred years after his death. Therefore, the work is a forgery.

The Acts Of Paul And Thecla (A.D. 170)

This work is found in the table of contents in Codex Bezae. Origen also quotes it as authoritative Scripture. It is the account of Thecla—a woman who was supposedly converted under the ministry of the Apostle Paul (Acts 14:1-7).

While it may be based upon a true story, the account is fictional. Among other things, this work contains a physical description of Paul.

The Letter To The Laodiceans (Unknown Date)

In Colossians 4:16 Paul mentioned a letter to the Laodiceans. He wrote the following to the church of Colosse:

And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16 NRSV).

This is what Paul wrote to the Colossians. However, this later work, known as the "Letter to the Laodiceans," is not from Paul. Rather it is a compilation

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of a number of phrases from Paul's writings. The claim of the Scriptural status concerning this work came later in the history of the church.

A work with this name is mentioned in the Muratorian fragment—an early canonical list. However, this is not referring to the same written work. As can be imagined, this has caused some confusion.

Many Latin manuscripts, which were produced for church use, actually contain this work. In the 10th century Alfric, who later became archbishop of Canterbury, listed the work as among Paul's canonical writings. It has appeared in some Bibles from the 6th to the 15th century. For example, it was part of the Bohemian Bible of 1488.

There is more. During the Protestant Reformation this fraudulent work appeared in some English and German Bibles. However, its canonical status has never been accepted by the church nor should it be accepted.

Third Corinthians

One work that made it into some canonical lists was Third Corinthians. This was received as canonical by some of the leaders of the Syrian Church in the Fourth Century.

However, there is no evidence that this work was written by Paul. It is possible that this work was actually created by believers to combat the spread of Gnosticism.

The Gnostics made much about the phrase Paul used, “flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God.” This took this to mean that Paul did not teach the bodily resurrection of believers. Yet, this is something which he did indeed clearly teach. Third Corinthians may have been composed to clarify the view of Paul on the subject.

These Works Are Not Scriptural But They Are Of Some Importance

These works fail to add anything to God's revelation, or to our knowledge of the history of redemption. While these writings cannot claim canonical status, they are important for a number of reasons. They include the following.

First, they give us insight into the practices of the early church. They help us understand how the early church understood the commands of the New Testament.

In addition, we learn about certain of the teachings that were circulating at an early date that claimed to be “Christian.” We know that false doctrine was being taught from the very beginning. These works help us understand some of these false teachings.

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Finally, they give added testimony to the genuine books that make up the present New Testament. They further the case that the New Testament was limited to the twenty-seven books that make up the canon of Scripture.

Summary To Question 26:

Were Certain Books Left Out Of The New Testament Canon?

There were a number of books written early in the history of the church that gained some sort of canonical status by at least one church father or are found in at least one of the important ancient Greek manuscripts that contain the New Testament or are found in some printed Bibles.

They include: The Letter of Clement, the Second Letter of Clement, The Letter of Barnabas, The Shepherd of Hermas, The Didache, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Acts of Paul and Thecla, The Letter to the Laodiceans, and Third Corinthians.

These writings, however, were never seriously considered to be canonical by the majority of Christians.

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Question 27

What Is Canon Criticism?

Canon criticism is the name for a discipline that does not necessarily accept the present New Testament canon of Scripture. It believes that the issue of the canon was settled in the wrong way, and still needs to be discussed.

Usually the argument revolves around two basic things—the early Christians based their decisions on wrong information and the Protestant Reformers, in the sixteenth century, gave unacceptable criteria for which books needed to be included in the canon of Scripture.

There Are Two Basic Ways In Which The Present Canon Is Criticized

Those who criticize the present canon of Scripture usually argue in either one of two ways. Some contend there should be a canon within the present canon—not all of the books presently considered Scripture should be in the New Testament canon. It is also argued that other books should be considered as canonical that are not part of the New Testament. We can make the following observations.

1. The Charge Is That The Early Church Was Acting On Wrong Information When Putting Together The Canon

It is contended that the early Christians made their decisions, with respect to the canon, based upon either incomplete or inaccurate information. For example, many modern critics reject Second Peter as having been written by Peter.

In addition, they reject the claim that the letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus as having been written by Paul. They believe these four writings are forgeries.

Paul's authorship of Ephesians is also questioned as whether it actually came from him. Consequently, it is argued, that these books should be excluded from the New Testament canon.

2. It Is Also Alleged That Unacceptable Criteria Were Used To Determine The Canonical Books

The criteria that the Protestant reformers used to determine which books belonged in the New Testament were also flawed. Martin Luther argued that the book must “teach Christ.” John Calvin said the testimony of the Holy Spirit would bear witness to each individual Christian in every age as to what was God's Word and what was not.

These criteria are too subjective and cannot be used as a basis to determine which book does, or does not, belong in Holy Scripture.

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Therefore, the canon should be revised to fit the latest so-called most up-to-date scholarship. To many, this includes taking out certain books such as 1,2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Peter.

Response: This Charge Has No Basis In Fact

First, it is arrogant to contend that people twenty centuries removed from the events can make a better judgment than those living at the time. The initial people who accepted the books of the New Testament as Holy Scripture had direct links to Jesus and His apostles.

Indeed, the apostles themselves were likely to have confirmed the authority of all of the New Testament books. These writings were copied, recopied, and circulated because their authority lay behind them.

The Reformers did indeed give inadequate reasons for accepting the New Testament canon. However, we have the promise of Jesus as well as the historical evidence that the church did make the right decision with respect to the biblical books. We do not rely solely upon the criteria set down by the Protestant reformers.

As each of the New Testament books is carefully examined, we find that there are sufficient reasons for accepting their divine inspiration and authority. The canon is closed and the right books are in it!

Summary To Question 27: What Is Canon Criticism?

Canon criticism believes the question of the New Testament canon has not been closed—the issue is still very much open. Consequently, some books can be either added or subtracted from the New Testament.

It is also contended that the early church relied on either inaccurate or incomplete information when they made their comments about the canon. In addition, the Protestant reformers made their decisions on criteria which were “too subjective.”

Thanks to the efforts of these so-called “better-informed” people, we can now subtract certain books from the New Testament. Among the candidates often cited are 1,2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Peter and possibly Ephesians.

Thankfully, the great masses of believers have never taken these people seriously. Each book which is in the New Testament has the right to be there. The New Testament contains twenty-seven separate documents which the church recognizes as divinely authoritative. End of discussion.

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Question 28

Is It Possible That Someone Other Than The Stated Author Wrote One Or More Of The Biblical Books? (Pseudonymous Writing)

Were all of the Books in Scripture actually written by those who claimed to have written them? Is it possible that some of the works were actually composed by someone else?

It has been claimed that a few of the books that are now part of the Bible were not actually written by the person who claimed to be the actual author. What are we to make of this accusation?

Several observations need to be made. They are as follows.

1. Pseudonymous Writing Defined: Someone Pretends To Be A Biblical Character And Writes A Book Under Their Name

There has been the charge that one or more of the books that are in the canon of Scripture were not really authored by the person named but were rather penned by someone writing under their name. This is not the author using a scribe to write for him. It is rather someone pretending to be someone they are not. This is known as “pseudonymous writing.”

2. Pseudonymous Writing Was Supposedly A Common Practice

There have been those who have argued that pseudonymous writing was a common practice in the ancient world. They argue that people expected some writers to use the name of a famous person for their own work.

Because this was a common practice, it was not readily detected. For example, there were writings that have claimed to have come from biblical characters such as Moses, Enoch, and Abraham which were not written by these people.

Whether or not the original recipients of these works believed that these biblical characters were the actual writers, we know that later readers did not accept these as authentic writings coming from these people.

Biblical Books Accused Of Being Pseudonymous

The biblical books that are usually cited as possible candidates are the following: Ecclesiastes, Ephesians, First and Second Timothy, Titus, and Second Peter. They are often accused of being pseudonymous.

Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes claims to have been written by King Solomon, the son of David. The first verse of the book reads as follows:

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The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem (Ecclesiastes 1:1 KJV)

However, it has been argued that the actual author was not Solomon, but rather someone writing under his name.

Ephesians

Ephesians claims to be a letter by the Apostle Paul. It opens by saying the following:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:1 KJV).

Yet it is claimed by some that the actual writer was one of Paul's disciples, and not Paul himself.

The Pastorals Letters (1,2 Timothy, Titus)

The three pastoral letters, First and Second Timothy and Titus, all claim to have been written by Paul. At the beginning of First Timothy it says:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the commandment of God our Saviour, and Lord Jesus Christ, which is our hope; Unto Timothy, my own son in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Timothy 1:1,2 KJV).

In the second letter to Timothy, we read the following:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my dearly beloved son: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord (2 Timothy 1:1,2 KJV).

To Titus, the introduction reads as follows:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness (Titus 1:1 ESV).

It is often assumed that the pastorals were not written by Paul, but rather by a later author using his name. Many of those who contend that these letters were not actually authored by Paul say that this was a common practice in the ancient world and that the first readers would have understood that Paul was not the genuine author. Therefore, they knew that Paul was not really the writer of these letters.

Second Peter

Second Peter claims to have been written by Peter. The letter begins by stating the following:

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Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:1 NRSV).

However, it is assumed, by some, that the actual author was not the biblical character Peter, but rather it was written by someone else using his name.

Problems With Pseudonymous Writings In Scripture

There are a number of problems with the idea of certain biblical books being written by pseudonymous writers. They include the following.

1. We Are Dealing With The Word Of God Which Is Truth

The major problem we find, in holding that certain biblical books were pseudonymous, is that the author of the work would be lying to his audience.

While this may have been practiced to some degree in the ancient world, we are not talking about any ordinary writing. What is under consideration is Holy Scripture—the Word of God to humanity.

How can it be claimed that God could endorse a book that gives a false idea as to whom the human author was? It is inconsistent with the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. In what sense can these documents be divinely inspired if the author was not actually the person whom he claims to be?

2. There Are Personal References In These Writings

There is also the issue of personal references in the works. In these so-called pseudonymous works the author not only identifies himself, he also gives personal references. They include the following.

In First Timothy, we have the writer reminding Timothy of what he had previously told him. It says:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith (1 Timothy 1:4 NKJV).

In Second Timothy, the author says he is reminded of seeing Timothy's tears. We read the following:

I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day, greatly desiring to see you, being mindful of your tears, that I may be filled with joy (2 Timothy 1:3,4 NKJV).

In Titus, the writer who calls himself Paul, reminds Titus that he left him behind in Crete:

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To Titus, my loyal child in the faith we share: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior. I left you behind in Crete for this reason, so that you should put in order what remained to be done, and should appoint elders in every town, as I directed you (Titus 1:4,5 NRSV).

The author of Second Peter claimed to have been with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration:

And he [Jesus] received honor and glory from God the Father when God's glorious, majestic voice called down from heaven, "This is my beloved Son; I am fully pleased with him." We ourselves heard the voice when we were there with him on the holy mountain (2 Peter 1:17,18 NLT).

If the author was not the one who was named in the work, then the personal references that are contained in it are deceitful and misleading. How can this be consistent with the God of truth who divinely inspired the writing? Would God endorse such lies?

3. These Letters Warned Against Deception And Deceivers

There is another fact that needs to be considered. In these later letters that claimed to have come from Paul, First and Second Timothy and Titus, there are warnings to his readers about people who would attempt to deceive them:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:1,2 NKJV).

In Second Timothy, we read the following:

But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived (2 Timothy 3:13 NKJV).

Paul wrote the following to Titus:

For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision (Titus 1:10 NKJV).

We find the author also saying that he is not lying in his letter. He stated the following:

For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth (1 Timothy 2:7 NRSV).

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Are we to believe that each of these letters, which warned against deceivers, and claimed to be speaking the truth of God, was not actually written by the person who claimed to be the author—Paul?

Peter

Peter himself also warned about false prophets and false teachers:

There used to be false prophets among God's people, just as you will have some false teachers in your group. They will secretly teach things that are wrong—teachings that will cause people to be lost. They will even refuse to accept the Master, Jesus, who bought their freedom. So they will bring quick ruin on themselves (2 Peter 2:1 NCV).

If Peter did not write this letter, then the author, whoever he might be, would be in the same category as these false teachers and false prophets that he warned against. He would have been a liar!

The evidence is clear that the early church was very concerned about false teaching. This would make them all the more careful to be certain of the authorship of any work that claimed to have come from a leading New Testament figure. They realized that false teachers were out there, and they wanted to make certain only genuine writings were accepted as authoritative. Paul wrote:

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works (2 Corinthians 11:13-15 NKJV).

Since the Lord only designated a select few to authoritatively teach His truth, the question of the authorship of any document would be of the utmost importance.

4. Pseudonymous Writing Was Not That Common

It has also been alleged that pseudonymous writing was common in the ancient world. However, the evidence is not that compelling that pseudonymous writing was done on a regular basis.

Even if it was common, it certainly does not mean that any of the biblical books were written pseudonymously. There has to be solid proof for claiming the person whose name is on the letter did not actually write it.

5. Some Of The New Testament Books Are Anonymous

There is something else. A number of the New Testament books do not contain the name of the author in the body of the text. This would include the four gospels, the Book of Acts, Hebrews, and First, Second, and Third

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John. If it was so necessary for a work to have the name of a biblical character to be accepted, then why do we find these anonymous works?

Evidently it was not that necessary for the writer to identify himself in the body of the text for it to be accepted. If this be the case, then why would someone feel the need to use the name of a biblical character to have his writing accepted as authentic?

6. There Was Care Taken By The Church To Assure Authenticity Of The Writings

It seems that there were pseudonymous letters circulating that claimed to have been written by the Apostle Paul. Paul warned the church at Thessalonica about them:

Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come (2 Thessalonians 2:1,2 NKJV).

We also find that care was taken to assure the writings that had Paul's name on them were authentic. When Paul wrote the following to the Thessalonians, he said that his actual signature was on the letter:

This greeting is in my own handwriting; all genuine letters of mine bear the same signature—Paul (2 Thessalonians 3:17 REB).

Evidently Paul's signature was so distinct that it was easily recognizable and difficult to forge. Why all the concern to demonstrate the work was authentic?

Obviously, Paul did not think that it was acceptable for someone to write a letter using his name. Therefore, while Paul was aware of the practice of writing a pseudonymous letter, he certainly rejected the idea.

7. Christians Did Not Accept Pseudonymous Letters

There is more. The evidence shows that the church did not accept letters that were forgeries. We have historical examples of how the church dealt with pseudonymous letters.

For example, there was one early work called the "Acts of Paul." Among other things, this work contained a "third" letter to the Corinthians that supposedly came from the apostle Paul. When it was recognized that Paul did not write the letter, it was rejected.

The presbyter who actually wrote this letter was removed from his office. Such was the response of Christians to forged letters. It was of no concern what motivation was behind the writing, or how orthodox it was in its doctrine.

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The same holds true for another ancient work “the letter to the Laodiceans.” The Apostle Paul mentioned a letter to the Laodiceans in his letter to the Colossians:

After this letter has been read to your people, be sure to have it read in the church at Laodicea. And you should read the letter that I have sent to them (Colossians 4:16 CEV).

This work titled the “Letter to the Laodiceans” patched together a number of passages and phrases from Paul’s genuine works. While the letter was orthodox in its teaching, it was rejected by the believers because it did not come from the hand of Paul. These types of false letters could not be accepted by God’s people—no matter what the motive that was behind the writing.

When the church discussed the subject of the books belonged in the New Testament canon the issue of authorship was crucial. If the church did not believe the alleged author wrote the book attributed to him, then the work was rejected.

For example, Second Peter was accepted into the New Testament canon of Scripture because it was concluded that Peter was the actual author. If believers suspected someone else wrote the work attributed to Peter, then its canonical status would have been rejected.

We find no examples in the writings of the early Christians where they argued a book should be included in the New Testament canon of Scripture even though it was not composed by the author whose name is on the work.

8. There Is No Need To Assume The Claim To Authorship Was False

Finally, there is no need to resort to calling any biblical work pseudonymous. A good case can be made for the authorship of the person who claims to have written the document. Therefore, one does not have to appeal to the work as being pseudonymous.

For example, there are excellent arguments for Paul writing the letters to Timothy and Titus, as well as the letter to the Ephesians. The authorship of Second Peter by the Apostle Peter can also be defended. The same holds true for Solomon writing the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Given the feeling of the church toward pseudonymous letters, it is all the more certain that the actual authors wrote these letters for the Christians to have accepted them.

Thus, when all the evidence is in, a strong case can be made for the traditional view of the authorship of all of the books of Scripture. We do not have to resort to saying that certain works were pseudonymous. Consequently, the idea that some of the biblical books were written pseudonymously should be rejected.

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Summary To Question 28: Is It Possible That Someone Other Than The Stated Author Wrote One Or More Of The Biblical Books? (Pseudonymous Writing)

Certain books of Scripture have been attributed to pseudonymous writings—the author is not the one whose name is stated in the text. Ecclesiastes, Ephesians, First and Second Timothy, Titus, and Second Peter have all been accused of being pseudonymous.

The idea of certain biblical writings being written by someone other than the named author has many problems.

First, it is hard to reconcile the writer lying about his identity in a work that claims to be divinely inspired of God. Would God endorse such a practice? In addition, the lie would be compounded with personal references. Add to this the practice of pseudonymous writing may not have been that common in the ancient world.

From the writings of the apostle Paul, we find that care was taken to assure the readers of the authenticity of the letter. It was not acceptable for someone to falsely use the name of a prominent New Testament character.

We also find that when the church discovered that a work was pseudonymous, it was immediately rejected. It did not matter the reason it was written, or how orthodox or correct it was in its teaching. They did not accept this practice.

Finally, there is no need to assume that the stated author did not write the books. A good case can be made that the author whose name is contained in the letter was actually the person who composed it.

Are The Right Books In The New Testament?

About The Author

Don Stewart is a graduate of Biola University and Talbot Theological Seminary (with the highest honors).

Don is a best-selling and award-winning author having authored, or co-authored, over seventy books. This includes the best-selling *Answers to Tough Questions*, with Josh McDowell, as well as the award-winning book *Family Handbook of Christian Knowledge: The Bible*. His various writings have been translated into over thirty different languages and have sold over a million copies. His available books can be found on his website www.educatingourworld.com.

Don is now a full-time missionary with GoinChrist Ministries. His website educatingourworld.com provides free resources for those wanting to know what Christians believe, as well as why we believe. Currently there are 61 books on the site in PDF form, totaling about 13,000 pages of material while answering over 1,900 questions. Eventually we hope to record all the books, as well as translating the material in other languages.