

Lesson 5: The Canonicity and Structure of the New Testament

1. What is Canonicity?

Meaning of the word “canon” (Greek: kanon = measuring rod/standard).

The canon is recognized, not created, by the Church.

The Church did not “choose” the books; it acknowledged those inspired by God.

2. Myths vs. Truths

Myth: The Church and/or Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) decided which books belonged in the Bible.

Truth: By Nicaea, the NT was already recognized as authoritative.

3. Biblical Recognition of Scripture

Immediate recognition of New Testament writings

Myth: Letters were written to churches and the story of Jesus was written by different men... the ones that survived are in the Bible... the ones that did not survive or were lost were just not meant to be.

Truth: The churches copied and circulated the letters they knew were inspired by God as Scripture.

Myth: The New Testament writers were just writing letters to churches not thinking it was Scripture.

Truth: The writers knew they were recording the New Covenant Scriptures

1 Thessalonians 2:13 *For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.*

Warning about counterfeits

2 Thessalonians 2:2 *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 Peter 2:1 *But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.*

Public reading of Apostolic books

Thessalonians 5:27 *I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.*

The circulation and collection of books

Colossians 4:16 *Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.*

2 Peter 3:15-16 *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, 16 as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these 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.*

4. Comparison between the Old Testament and New Testament Canonicity

They were both immediately recognized as from God.

The OT was written over 1,200 years (1445-425 BC). The NT was written over 50 years (45-95 AD).

The Old Testament writings had a central religious group and location, where the New Testament writings did not.

The Old Testament writings were carefully copied and distributed in one main language, where the New Testament writings were more in number of copies, were more hurried and was translated in other languages sooner.

5. Structure of the New Testament

The Four Major Divisions: Gospels, Historical, Epistles, Prophecy

The Gospels (4 books) – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

Matthew – Christ the King, fulfillment of prophecy.

Mark – Christ the Servant, main points of Christ's life.

Luke – Christ the Son of Man, emphasis on compassion and detail.

John – Christ the Son of God, focus on belief and eternal life.

Historical (1 book) – Acts. Written by Luke. Records birth and expansion of the Church.

The Epistles (letters) (21 books)

Pauline Epistles (13 letters) – Written by Paul.

To Churches: Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians.

To Individuals: 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon.

General Epistles (8 letters) – Written by other apostles.

Hebrews (unknown), James (half brother of Jesus), 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude half brother of Jesus).

Prophecy (1 book) – Revelation. Written by John. Reveals Jesus as King and Victory over the earth.

6. New Testament (AD 45-95)

Matthew (50-68)

Mark (50-68)

Luke (55-61)

John (80-90)

Acts (62-63)

Romans (56-57)

1 Corinthians (54-55)

2 Corinthians (55-56)

Galatians (48)

Ephesians (61-62)

Philippians (62)

Colossians (61-62)

1 Thessalonians (51)

2 Thessalonians (51)

1 Timothy (62)

2 Timothy (67)

Titus (64-66)

Philemon (61-62)

Hebrews (64-65)

James (44-45)

1 Peter (64-65)

2 Peter (66-67)

1 John (85-90)

2 John (85-90)

3 John (85-90)

Jude (70-75)

Revelation (95-96)

James (44-45)

Galatians (48)

1 Thessalonians (51)

2 Thessalonians (51)

1 Corinthians (54-55)

2 Corinthians (55-56)

Romans (56-57)

Ephesians (61-62)

Philemon (61-62)

Colossians (61-62)

Philippians (62)

1 Timothy (62)

Acts (62-63)

Titus (64-66)

Hebrews (64-65)

1 Peter (64-65)

2 Peter (66-67)

2 Timothy (67)

Jude (70-75)

1 John (85-90)

2 John (85-90)

3 John (85-90)

Revelation (95-96)

7. Church Father's Recognition

The writings of the early church leaders, pastors and preachers show what they believed to be inspired and what they did not believe to be inspired

Clement (AD 35-99)

Polycarp (AD 69-155) a disciple of the apostle John, quotes from Matthew, John, the first ten letters of Paul, 1 Peter and 1 and 2 John.

Ignatius (AD 130-202)

Papias (c. AD 70-163) *Interpretation of the Oracles of the Lord* (c. 120) includes material from the four Gospels.

Justin Martyr (c. AD 140) referred to all four Gospels, most of Paul's letters, 1 Peter and Revelation.

Irenaeus (c. AD 170) disciple of Polycarp is the first early church father to quote almost every book of the New Testament.

Tatian (c. AD 170)

Origen (AD 185-254) wrote commentaries and homilies on most of the New Testament books, emphasizing their inspiration.

Dionysius of Alexandria (c. AD 200-264)

Eusebius (AD 270-340)

Athanasius (AD 296-373) in 367 gave the first full declaration on the extent of both Old and New Testament canons. The twenty-seven books he listed as New Testament Canon are the same twenty-seven books in our Bibles today.

Augustine (AD 354-430)

Jerome (AD 342-420) In a letter dated 414 he accepts the New Testament books as fixed.

8. Distinguishing Canon from Apocrypha & Pseudepigrapha

Apocrypha = hidden or concealed books

Not part of the New Testament canon.

Books not on the front shelf, but not thrown away as frauds.

In response, the Council of Trent (1546), during the Counter-Reformation, officially declared the apocryphal books as part of the inspired canon for the Roman Catholic Church.

Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha were written primarily between BC 400 and 1 BC and have an Old Testament focus, not about Jesus

New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha were written after Christ and have a New Testament focus

Historical Context of the Council of Trent

The Protestant Reformation (1517 onward) challenged the authority of the pope, indulgences, and the works-based system of righteousness.

Authority: Scripture and Tradition

Trent declared that **Scripture and tradition are equally authoritative.**

Salvation: Grace, Faith, and Works

The Reformers taught: **Salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.**

Trent condemned this, insisting: Salvation involves **sacramental grace**. Justification requires both **grace and works**. Faith without sacraments cannot save.

The Sacraments of the Church

Trent affirmed **seven sacraments**, all necessary for salvation: Baptism, Confirmation, Communion (Eucharist), Penance (confession), Unction (last rites), Orders (ordination), Marriage

- It condemned anyone who denied the necessity of the sacraments.
- The New Testament institutes only **two ordinances** given by Christ:
 - Baptism (Matthew 28:19)
 - The Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

The Eucharist and Transubstantiation

Trent reaffirmed **transubstantiation**: the bread and wine literally become Christ's body and blood.

The Reformers rejected this, teaching the Lord's Supper as a memorial and spiritual communion, not a re-sacrifice of Christ.

Lasting Impact of the Council of Trent

Modern Roman Catholicism continues to affirm Trent's doctrines.

Vatican II (1962–65) made reforms but did not overturn Trent.

For Protestants, Trent highlights the sharp divide between **grace-alone salvation** and **sacramental/works-based salvation**.

New Testament Apocrypha Writings (No New Testament Apocrypha writings are found in the Catholic Bible)

Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas (c. AD 70-130)

Shepherd of Hermas (c. AD 115-140)

Didache (c. AD 100-120)

Apocalypse of Peter (c. AD 150)

The Acts of Paul (AD 170)

The Gospel According to the Hebrews (AD 65-100)

The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (c. AD 108)

New Testament Pseudepigrapha - "Pseudo" = false; "Grapha" = writings.

These books indicate the heretical teaching of gnostic groups, as well as the exaggerated fancy of religious lore in the early church.

Written after the Apostles. They are inconsistent with the OT and the NT.

Confuse the humanity and divinity of Christ

New Testament Pseudepigrapha Writings

The Gospel of Thomas (early second century) This gnostic gospel is a mixture of authentic sayings of Jesus and Gnostic teachings which only the enlightened few are supposed to be able understand.

The Gospel of Phillip , The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, The Gospel of the Ebionites, The Gospel of Peter.

1. Trust the Bible with Confidence

2. Guard Against Counterfeits

3. Value the Whole Counsel of God

4. Live as People of the Word