

**REVELATION**



**INSPIRATION**



**ANIMATION**



**COLLECTION**

**4**

**TRANSLATION**



**ILLUMINATION**



**INTERPRETATION**



**APPLICATION**



**COMMUNICATION**

## **THE WRITTEN WORD**

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, July 26, 2009

### **The New Testament Canon**

*While the confirmation of the Old Testament canon was 'retrospective' in nature (being affirmed by Christ in His time), the confirmation of the New Testament canon was 'prospective' in nature (being promised by Him before it was written).<sup>1</sup>*

#### **I. THE SCRIPTURAL PROMISE OF A NEW TESTAMENT CANON.**

A. As we have seen in a previous study, the Lord Jesus fully accepted and confirmed the authority of all the Old Testament Scriptures that we have in our Bible today (see "Inspiration #3: Jesus and The Authority of The Scriptures). His view--the most authoritative view there is--confirmed the Old Testament canon to us "retrospectively" (see Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 24:44; John 5:39). He believed it, cited it, lived by it, and affirmed that He was the fulfillment of it.

B. But when it comes to the New Testament canon, the Lord Jesus confirmed *its* authority in a different way--that is, "prospectively". He promised in advance the guidance of the Holy Spirit to His apostles (John 14:25-26; 16:12-15); who have, in turn, given us a written deposit of what the Spirit guided them to "remember" concerning His words for our benefit (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1ff; 2 Peter 1:12-15).

C. Other writers later claimed apostolic authority for the things they have written. But the possibility of a 'canon' of truly authoritative writings is testified by the fact that Paul warned Christians not to be deceived by false apostles (2 Corinthians 11:13), or by their writings (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2). Paul insisted that his and the other apostles' writings be held as authoritative (1 Corinthians 14:37; 2 Thessalonians 2:15); and Peter placed Paul's writings with "Scripture" (2 Peter 3:15-16).

#### **II. REASONS A NEW TESTAMENT CANON BECAME NECESSARY.**

A. It's important to remember that what has been affirmed before concerning the Old Testament canon is also true for the New Testament canon. Canonization did not result in the recognition of any books of the New Testament to be "authoritative". Rather, the inherent, Spirit-affirmed authority of each New Testament writing was what led to the recognition of a New Testament canon. "Long before the apostolic letters were recognized as elements in a canonical collection, they were recognized as authoritative by most of those for whom they were written; as we have said before, authority is the necessary precedent of canonicity."<sup>2</sup>

B. For the first sixty years or so of the church's history after the completion of the last book of the New Testament, the need to define a 'canon' doesn't appear to have arisen. But around 140 A.D., a teacher from Asia Minor named Marcion came to Rome and developed a large following around the idea that anything 'Jewish' needed to be removed from Christianity and its Scriptures. He held that only the Gospel of Luke should be accepted (because it was written to present the gospel preached by Paul), and that only the writings of Paul should be accepted (with the exception of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). A canon of authoritative New Testament writings was already beginning to be recognized by the church at this point; but it became necessary to carefully define that canon in opposition to the teachings of Marcion.<sup>3</sup>

C. An opposite kind of problem also arose in Marcion's time. Several false teachers--chief examples of which would be men like the gnostic teacher Valentinus and the self-appointed, early charismatic-movement 'prophet' Montanus--insisted that their writings had the same authority as those of the apostles. These proposed "additions" to the collection of authoritative writings made it even more important that the limits of Scripture be defined. "Holy scripture, properly defined, would provide a check on uncontrolled prophecy as it did on undisciplined speculation."<sup>3</sup>

D. Another, very practical reason a New Testament canon was required was because of a need to establish a difference between those books that were 'authoritative' to read and teach from in the assembly of the church, and those that were considered 'edifying but not authoritative'. (Many books in the collection historically called "the church fathers" fall into the later category.)

E. Still another reason was because of the official threats against the church. When persecution officially broke out against the church in the beginning of the fourth century, attempts were made to destroy the church by destroying its Scriptures. A decision needed to be made as to which writings could be safely handed over to the authorities, and which ones needed to be preserved at the cost of one's life.

### III. LATER HISTORIC WITNESSES OF A NEW TESTAMENT CANON.

A. The church father Irenaeus, around 180 A.D.--in his effort to stave-off heresy--sought to articulate a canon of writings considered authoritative by the church (see his *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8).

B. Another important list was discovered in 1740; and has come to be called the Muratorian Canon (named after the cardinal who discovered it).

C. Around 230 A.D., the church father Origen listed the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's thirteen letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation as books accepted by all; and Hebrews 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude as disputed by some (along with some other writings). The fact that some were disputed simply means that the church was still debating the issue. These books were still disputed by the time of Eusebius in the fourth century (see his *Church History*, 3.25).

D. The first full list of the twenty-seven books we have in our New Testament today came in a festival letter from Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in 367 A.D. The same list was articulated later by Jerome and Augustine. The last of the historic church councils--the Synod of Hippo in 393 A.D.--recorded that these twenty-seven books had been recognized by the church at large as authoritative.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>F.F. Bruce, *The Books and The Parchments* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1984); p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>4</sup>F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: IL, InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 168.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, *The Books and The Parchments*, pp. 100-103.