

Chapter Nine

When and by Whom Was the New Testament Canonized?

One of the most frequently asked questions regarding the Bible is, “*When and by whom* were the Scriptures canonized?” Canonization was the process by which certain books became officially recognized as the authentic “God-breathed” Scriptures. To the exclusion of all others, only the canonized books can be used with full faith and confidence as the authoritative Word of God. While other writings, books and epistles may elaborate on certain points of Scripture or history, they do not have the authority of Scripture, nor are they equal to Scripture.

As such, the canonized Scriptures—Old and New Testaments—are the inspired Word of God. They reveal how one is to live and how one can worship God in spirit and in truth. When the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, he elaborated on the divine authority and use of the Holy Scriptures: “And that from a child you have known the Holy Writings [the canonized Old Testament], which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith, which *is* in Christ Jesus. **All Scripture** [including the New Testament books] **is God-breathed**, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for conviction, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work” (II Tim. 3:15-17).

Because the Scriptures are “God-breathed”—not humanly contrived myths and folklore—Christ made it clear that everyone is to live by them. When tempted by Satan the devil, Jesus emphatically stated that man was to live by “**every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God**” (Matt. 4:4).

Yet today, most professing Christians believe that Jesus came to abolish the Law—in spite of His clear statement to the contrary. “**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.** For truly I say to you, until the heaven and the earth shall pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the Law until everything has been fulfilled” (Matt. 5:17-18). These words of Jesus Christ are the New Testament teaching concerning the Law and the Prophets. As long as heaven and earth exist, the Law and the Prophets are binding on mankind.

The Generally Accepted Theory on New Testament Canonization

The New Testament canon refers to the group of books accepted as the authentic writings of the apostles and thus authoritative for teaching in the Church of God. The generally accepted theory is that the canon was completed late in the fourth century. Unger informs us that scholars have arbitrarily divided the canonization of the New Testament into five periods ranging from the first century to its “ratification” in 397 AD. “The canon of the New Testament, as commonly received at present, was ratified by the third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397), and from that time was accepted throughout the Latin Church...” (Canon of Scripture, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, p. 178).

The extended timetable of this theory of canonization—70 AD to 397 AD—is in error. God did not commit the canonization of the New Testament to men of dubious character and questionable faith some three hundred years after the apostle John’s death. This theory of canonization distorts the truth of how, when and by whom the books of the New Testament were canonized.

Dr. Ernest Martin also rejects this timetable. “It is normally assumed by scholars ... that the canon of the New Testament came into existence sometime in the early or middle second century, and was finalized in the fourth century. **This guessing is patently not true. Early Christian scholars did not believe such teaching.** Augustine, one of the most ardent supporters of the organized church of the fourth and fifth centuries, believed that the New Testament canon came into existence in the time of the apostles themselves. He stated: ‘Distinguished from the books of later authors is the excellence of the canonical authority of the Old and New Testaments; which, *having been established in the time of the apostles...*’ (*Contra Faustum Man. 11.5*).

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“In our present age, it is common to hear that the second, third, or fourth century church canonized the New Testament in some unknown and mysterious fashion. **This is in no way true.... The Christian community of the second, third or fourth centuries had nothing to do with the canonization of the New Testament**” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, pp. 300-301, bold emphasis added).

The nineteenth-century German scholar Theodor Zahn—in his two-volume work *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (1888-1892) and *Grundriss der Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (1904)—also concluded that the canonization of the New Testament was set by the end of the first century. Harry Y. Gamble wrote this summary: “Zahn’s massive study of the history of the canon ... argued that there was already a canon of Christian Scriptures by about the end of the first century (80-110) ... [and] that there had arisen a body of Christian documents read in public worship and broadly recognized and cited as normative. They consisted of the fourfold Gospel and a corpus of thirteen Pauline letters, as well as some other writings. Zahn believed that this was adequately documented by the fact that the church fathers, especially the early second-century Apostolic Fathers, were fully aware of these texts, which they clearly took to be fundamental resources of the church at large” (McDonald and Sanders, *The Canon Debate: On the Origins and Formation of the Bible*, pp. 267-268).

Conversely, acceptance of the theory of an extended period of canonization opened the door for the Roman Catholic Church to claim that other writings should be included as canonized scripture. These included the *apocryphal* books of the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament) and other spurious writings of the “early church fathers”—as well as later traditions of the Roman clergy. All of these were accepted as having an equal or greater status and authority for teaching doctrine and establishing religious practices.

Martin substantiates that the Catholic Church **never** had a part in the canonization of the New Testament: “Some historians would have people believe that the church of the early second century (or even the third or fourth century) probably formulated the final New Testament. There has always been a problem with this appraisal because **there is not a sliver of evidence that such a thing took place**. The truth is, when the early church fathers began to talk about the canon of the New Testament near the end of the second century, it is assumed that **it was already in their midst**. The first recorded discussion among the Catholic scholars about the books of the New Testament only concerned whether certain books in the canon were of lesser rank, not which books were needed to form the official canon (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, III. 25)” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, p. 295, bold emphasis added).

From the evidence, it is obvious that the most commonly accepted theory of the canonization of the New Testament is patently false. What then is the true scriptural and historical record? When and by whom was the New Testament canonized?

The New Testament Itself Reveals When and by Whom It Was Canonized

God did not want people to be in doubt as to *who* canonized the twenty-seven books of the New Testament; consequently, this information has been preserved in the New Testament itself. Martin states: “[The] New Testament itself speaks about its own canonization.... It was the apostles themselves who put together the New Testament books, not some unknown church group or groups of the second and/or third or fourth centuries” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, p. 281). The task of writing and canonizing the prophetic New Testament Scriptures was so profound and extensive that Jesus Christ used only His selected apostles to write it—and of those, only Paul, Peter and John, His special eyewitnesses, were used to canonize those writings.

The New Testament Is the Word of God

Jesus Christ is called “the Word of God” (John 1:1-3)—and indeed He spoke and taught the words of God. Jesus said, “The words that I speak to you, *they* are spirit and *they* are life” (John 6:63). God the Father inspired Christ to speak what He spoke and personally directed what He would accomplish (see John 14:10-11, 15, 21, 23-34).

Thus, when the apostles began to preach the Gospel as recorded in the book of Acts, they knew their preaching was the Word of God. They knew with faith and confidence that they were commissioned, authorized and sent by Jesus Christ, the Son of God—God manifested in the flesh—to be witnesses to the world of His resurrection from the dead and to proclaim that the gift of salvation is available through His name.

When and by Whom Was the New Testament Canonized?

The apostles not only preached the Word, but they also began to write at a very early date. In 30-31 AD, less than one year after Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostles began writing and compiling the teachings of Christ in order to teach the Gospel to new believers (Acts 6:4; see also Acts 2:37-41, 47; 4:4, 32; 5:12-16, 28; 6:1).

With the exception of Revelation, all the books of the New Testament were written well before the destruction of Jerusalem. In addition to the Old Testament, the books and Epistles written by the apostles were widely circulated in the churches and were used for reading, for teaching and for doctrinal understanding (Col. 4:16; I Thess. 4:1-3; 5:27; II Thess. 3:14; I Tim. 4:9-16; 6:1-6; II Tim. 2:15; 3:15-16; 4:1-4; Heb. 13:20-22; James 2:8-10; II Pet. 1:15; 3:15-16).

The apostles knew God had inspired their writings as the very Word of God. However, it was not until 63 AD that God finally revealed to Paul, Peter and John that they needed to canonize such writings into what would become the New Testament Scriptures. At that time, they understood that they were to fulfill the Word of God and bring it to its final, completed form. The New Testament canonization completed what God had begun with the book of Genesis in the Old Testament.

Three Special Eyewitnesses Canonized the New Testament Books

As stated previously, Jesus Christ had chosen the apostles Peter, James and John to be special eyewitnesses of the vision of His transfiguration. However, in 44 AD, James was beheaded by Herod, leaving only Peter and John as the remaining eyewitness of the transfiguration. A third special eyewitness—to replace James—was the apostle Paul.

The Change in Names: God sometimes changes the names of those whom He calls for a special purpose. Abram was renamed "Abraham" because God made him "a father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5). Sarai was renamed "Sarah" because God made her "a mother of nations" (Gen. 17:15-16). God changed Jacob's name to "Israel," saying "you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28).

The New Testament shows that, of the original twelve apostles, Jesus renamed only three—Peter, James and John. When Jesus first saw Simon Peter, He renamed him "Cephas," which means "stone" (John 1:42). Martin notes: "Peter [as a stone] was to be associated with Christ (the Rock *Himself*) in the creation of the Christian *ekklesia* [church].... Peter was also given the 'keys of the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 16:19).... And it appears certain that one of the main methods by which Peter would be able to exercise the power of the 'keys' was to be [partially] in charge of the canonization of the New Testament" (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, p. 311).

Jesus renamed James and John as the "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). Martin explains: "They were certainly not mild-tempered. They were to be men of 'Thunder.' In Hebrew 'thunder' (*kol*) meant the *Voice of God* (Exodus 9:23; Psalm 29:3; Jeremiah 10:13; etc.). The title could signify that they were to speak like God Himself—as personal spokesmen for God" (Ibid., p. 312). James—thundering the truth of God—had preached repentance and salvation through Christ in such a powerful way that the Jews could not stand to hear it. Thus, they persuaded Herod to kill him (Acts 12:1-2).

The fourth apostle to be renamed was Paul. When Paul is first mentioned in Scripture, he is called "Saul." With the full authority of the high priest of Jerusalem, Saul ravaged and tore asunder the Church, causing imprisonment and death to the disciples of Christ (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2). However, in 33 AD, Jesus personally called and converted Saul (Acts 9:3-30). Later in 44 AD, after Saul was ordained an apostle, his name was changed to "Paul" (Acts 13:3, 9). He was no longer Saul, the destroyer; rather, he was Paul, meaning "little one." And true to his new name, Paul reckoned himself as the "least of the apostles" (I Cor. 15:9) and counted himself "less than the least of all the saints" (Eph. 3:8).

Jesus personally trained Paul and gave him the special understanding necessary to preach the Gospel to the nations. During his three years' training in Arabia, Jesus gave Paul multiple visions and revelations. Without a doubt, the visions and revelations given to Paul were greater than the vision of the transfiguration that Peter, James and John had seen. **Paul was a specially chosen vessel to be the third eyewitness to replace James**, and was uniquely qualified to write and canonize his fourteen Epistles, as well as the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts—well over half of the New Testament!

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Paul Canonized His Own Epistles and Forwarded Them to Peter

In writing his Epistles, Paul made it known that his service to the brethren was by the grace of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, and not of himself (Eph. 3:2-8). With humility, he always emphasized that it was God the Father and Jesus Christ Who had called him and put him into the ministry. Paul had not done so by his own initiative or because of his personal abilities and education (I Tim. 1:11-14).

Paul “knew” that he was Christ’s personal representative, or ambassador, to the Gentiles (II Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 11:13). That he wrote by the authority of Christ is affirmed in every letter: “Paul, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, a called apostle, set apart to preach the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1; etc.).

Paul correctly understood that his Epistles were the commandments of God—the very words of God. They were not his own personal opinions or the ideas of a man. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that his teachings were the “**commandments of the Lord**” (I Cor. 14:37). He wrote to the Thessalonians saying, “[We] give thanks to God without ceasing: that when **you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you did not accept it as the word of men, but even as it is in truth—the Word of God, which is also working in you who believe**” (I Thess. 2:12-13).

There is no question Paul knew that what he wrote was the very Word of God. Therefore, after Paul had received the special revelation from God in 63 AD that Jesus’ return was not imminent, he realized that he had to canonize certain of his Epistles for future generations. It is likely that Paul began this process some time before he was released from his first Roman imprisonment in the fall of 63 AD. Paul and his assistants—Luke, Timothy, Mark and Silvanus—must have begun this task in a deliberate and thoughtful manner, trusting in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to guide them in the final selection and editing of Paul’s Epistles.

Years later, when Peter wrote his Second Epistle in 66 AD, he emphatically declared that Paul’s Epistles, which he had in his possession, were considered to be a part of Scripture (II Peter 3:15-16). Peter’s words—“the rest of the Scriptures”—must have referred to the Gospels, various Epistles and the Old Testament Scriptures.

The New Testament Writings Are Called the “Prophetic Scriptures”

The first phase in the canonization of Paul’s Epistles was completed by the apostle Paul himself, beginning in 63 AD. These initial Epistles were forwarded to Peter and John, who fully accepted them as Scriptures sanctioned by God. Peter called these Scriptures the “**confirmed prophetic Word**” (II Peter 1:19); and Paul wrote that his Epistles were “**the prophetic Scriptures,**” meaning that the writings were composed under the direct “inspiration” of God.

Peter’s Authority and Role in Canonization: When Peter wrote his second epistle, he left no doubt that he and the apostle John were forming the official text of New Testament teachings so that believers would have a “**written remembrance**” of the apostles’ teachings (II Peter 1:15). Peter also referred to this written remembrance as the “**confirmed prophetic Word**” (verse 19), now known as the New Testament Scriptures—the Word of God for eternal life.

The Apostle Paul Also Wrote “Prophetic Scriptures”: As previously stated, Paul had seen the resurrected Christ (I Cor. 15:8), and received his teachings directly and personally from Jesus (Gal. 1:11-12) as well as through dreams and revelations (II Cor. 12:1-5). Paul fully understood that he was writing “**prophetic Scriptures, according to the commandment of the eternal God...**” (Rom. 16:26).

Martin adds: “Peter and John were not the only ones who had ‘the word of prophecy more confirmed.’ The apostle Paul also had the authority to write ‘prophetic scriptures.’ At the end of the Book of Romans is an interesting section of scripture, which relates to the matter of canonization. Paul said that his writings concerning the message of Christ were to be acknowledged as ‘the Prophetic Scriptures.’ This meant that Paul thought he was writing *sacred* Scriptures” (Martin, *Restoring the Original Bible*, p. 305).

In Paul’s mind, uncertainty or ambiguity did not exist. He “knew” he had a part in completing the Word of God through his writings. “Paul stated that his apostolic commission was to present those new *prophetic scriptures* concerning ‘the Mystery’ to [the believers and to] the people of the world. Paul even realized that he was the one responsible for teaching the full, final and mature teachings of ‘the Mystery’ ” (Ibid., p. 306).

Paul’s letter to the Romans, along with Peter’s statements, gives us irrefutable evidence that God had commanded Paul, Peter and John to canonize the books of the New Testament before they died.

When and by Whom Was the New Testament Canonized?

God did not leave the writing and canonizing of the New Testament to other men to do hundreds of years after the apostles' deaths. **Only the apostles of Jesus Christ, whom God had specifically chosen for this task, wrote and canonized the New Testament.**

Martin comments: "Peter was indicating that the prophetic scriptures which he and John were leaving with Christians were not their own private ideas and words. They were nothing less than **the direct teachings of God**. This dogmatism of Peter is reflected also in his evaluation of the apostle Paul's epistles, which he mentioned as being on an equal par with 'the other Scriptures' of the Old Testament (II Peter 3:15, 16)" (Ibid., p. 304, bold emphasis added).

Before he was released from his first imprisonment in Rome in 63 AD, Paul wrote to the Colossians that he had been called to "**complete** [Greek, *to bring to the full, to complete*] **the Word of God...**" (Col. 1:25). Martin comments: "This is an important statement relative to the canonization of the New Testament. It tells us in no uncertain terms that Paul knew he had been given a special commission to help fulfill (that is, to 'fill to the top') the Word of God. This is why Paul had little reluctance in telling people about the high calling that he had. Paul considered that the teachings he recorded represented the very commandments of God. 'If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write unto you **are the commandments of God** [the Lord]' (I Corinthians 14:37). These are strong and authoritative words. No man could make such assertions unless he was convinced in his own mind [by the power of the Holy Spirit] that he had the prophetic office to write inspired scripture" (Ibid., pp. 306-307, bold emphasis added).

Martin adds: "When one comprehends that Paul himself was aware of his role in completing the full message of God to this world, then the statements of Peter in his Second Epistle can begin to make sense. Peter readily acknowledged that the apostle Paul was given an **equal commission along with himself and John, to write 'prophetic scriptures'**" (Ibid., p. 307, bold emphasis added).

Paul's Final Canonization of His Epistles

During Paul's second imprisonment in Rome in 67 AD (II Tim. 2:9), he realized his death was imminent (II Tim. 4:6-8). Knowing he would soon be martyred, Paul urgently began to complete the canonization of his Epistles. At this time, Luke was with Paul and could assist in this all-important task. However, in order for Paul to complete his work, he needed Timothy—and Mark. Paul summoned Timothy, specifically requesting that he bring Mark as well. Mark had previously assisted both Paul and Peter, and would be invaluable in helping Paul edit his Epistles and complete his canonization before his death (II Tim. 4:9-11).

Paul also wanted Timothy to bring several important items needed to complete the canonization of his Epistles. "When you come, bring the **chest** [incorrectly rendered *cloak* in the *KJV*] that I left in Troas with Carpus, and the **books**—especially the **parchments**" (II Tim 4:13). We can deduce that this chest contained Paul's own writings—as well as extra sheets of parchment or animal skins that had been made into blank pages for writing. Once Timothy and Mark arrived with these items, Paul could then add the final inspired additions to his Epistles. Because Paul had already canonized eleven of his Epistles earlier in 63 AD, this final canonization probably required little editing.

When the relevant information contained in the writings of the New Testament is brought to light, absolute proof emerges that the apostles Paul and Peter canonized their Epistles before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In the following chapter, we will see that the New Testament was not completed until God gave the apostle John the task of finishing his Gospel and epistles, writing the book of Revelation and canonizing the entire New Testament before he died.