



QUESTION:
Who decided which books should make up
the Canon of New Testament Scriptures,
and how was the decision reached?



This month's subject was suggested to me by a brother who recently watched a TV programme which claimed that certain important books have been deliberately left out of the New Testament. And the reason? Because, it was inferred, they brought the orthodox view of Christianity into question.

Many of you will know, I am sure, that there is nothing new in the claim that there are so-called 'inspired' books' which have been left out of the Book, or that other long-lost or forgotten books have been 're-discovered', so I do not intend to deal with it in this article.

The question that our brother raised is, in my view, far more worthy of discussion. He asked: "*Who decided which books should make up the canon of New Testament scriptures, and how was the decision reached?*"

You will appreciate that this is a subject on which we could spend far more time than is available to us in this issue of the 'S.S.', and so my response must be both as extensive and as concise as possibly, in the space available to us. Before we get to grips with the question proper there are one or two terms in the question that need to be clearly understood.

1. Begin with the term "**The New Testament**". We must bear in mind that Christianity had been in existence for a good number of years before it was first used. In fact, it was first used towards the end of the 2nd Century A.D., as a description of: *'That collection of writings which consists of the narrative works of the Life of Christ and the Acts of Apostles, proceeding to the epistles, and concluding on an apocalyptic note with the 'Revelation'.*

This is the definition, which, about 50 years ago, I heard Prof. F.F Bruce use at Manchester University, in a series of lectures on the documents of the New Testament, and I have never found anything better.

2. The word '**Testament**' itself comes from the Greek word '*diatheke*', and means 'settlement, covenant or agreement'.

3. The word '**canon**' is the English transliteration of the Greek word '*kanon*', and its literal meaning is 'measuring rod', or 'rule'. Therefore, in religious terms, it refers to that collection of writings, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and regarded by Christians as the authoritative rule of faith.

The Compilation of the New Testament.

The volume that we call 'The New Testament' did not make a miraculous appearance on the day the Church began. It was not presented as a blueprint to instruct the early Christians in the formation of the Church. Instead, the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament were written over a number of years after the Lord's ministry, and there were at least two reasons why they were written.

1. The Creation of a Historical Record.

So long as the Lord's personally chosen and personally authorized apostles and other eye-witnesses were alive, their personal testimony was accepted without question, and written accounts were considered unnecessary. It was only when these eyewitnesses began to die that it was recognized that it was necessary to

produce a written record of their testimony, and this resulted in the writing of the four 'Gospels'. As for the 'Epistles', the letters were produced either in response to problems which arose among the young churches, or, as it became necessary to meet particular needs.

2. Apostolic Instruction

As the message spread through 'Judea, Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth', in fulfilment of the Lord's Commission, churches were established in parts of the Roman Empire which His twelve Apostles were unable to visit in person. Instead of receiving their *spoken* word some churches received their inspired *written* word. Read Col. 3:16.

This means that many epistles were written even before the four 'Gospels', and this presents us with the fascinating fact, that, whenever the writer of an epistle refers to words or works of Jesus, his account is our earliest recorded account of those words or works. For example, Paul's mention of the institution of the Lord's Supper, found in 1st Cor 11:23, is the first recorded account of what happened in the Upper Room on the night of the Betrayal.

The Collection of the Books

Jesus wrote no books. He taught His disciples and commanded them to teach others. Thus, the earliest written document connected with the faith was probably a collection of the sayings of Jesus, and it was only around A.D.60 that the first 'Gospel', or 'Life of Christ', made its appearance. By this time several of the New Testament epistles had already been written; to mention just a few, Galatians in 48 A.D., 1st & 2nd Thessalonians in 50 A.D., and 1st Corinthians in 54 A.D.

These letters written by Paul were at first preserved by the churches and individuals to whom they had been sent, but around 90 A.D. copies appear to have begun to be circulated among the churches. We know, for instance, that in 95 A.D., Clement of Rome, writing on behalf of the Church in Rome, sent a letter to the Church in Corinth in which he quoted quite freely from Paul's letters to both Rome and Corinth, and possibly quoted from other letters also.

For several years books and letters continued to circulate independently among the churches, but at the beginning of the 2nd century, a collection of the Four Gospels, with 'Acts' possibly being attached to 'Luke' made its appearance. Later, 'Acts' was detached from the Four Gospel volume, and also began an independent circulation.

Then, still in the 2nd century, there existed a collection of 10 epistles, which, a little later, grew to a collection of 13 books, and the circulation of these two collections, constituted the first move towards the establishment of a canon of New Testament books.

The 'Canon' of New Testament Scriptures.

Some years ago, the 'Church of Rome' ran a publicity campaign that claimed that she gave us the Bible - a preposterous claim indeed, considering the fact that, for centuries, Rome hunted, imprisoned and even killed anyone found in possession of a copy of the scriptures! **The Vatican still claims that its 'Church Councils' determined and established the canon of the scriptures, but this is merely another claim that the facts prove is utterly false.**

One of the preposterous stories which Rome's 'historians' ask the world to believe, is that when the matter of the canon of scripture was discussed at one of the Church Councils, the ecclesiastics could not agree which books should be included and which should be excluded. Leaving the books under the table, they all left the room and retired to pray in order to seek divine guidance, and when they returned certain

books had found their way onto the table. This, they claimed, was how God had revealed His will, and therefore they decided that these were the books that should form the Canon of New Testament scriptures.

The truth, however, is much simpler and much more credible. In 367 A.D. Athanasius produced a list of the books that Christians recognized and accepted as divinely inspired, and his list consisted of the 27 books that make up our New Testament today.

Furthermore, the list was endorsed by both Jerome and Augustine, both of whom lived within a few years of Athanasius, and the important fact which must be borne in mind is that these men were merely placing on record the names of the books which were already recognized by the churches in both East and West. The testimonies of Jerome and Augustine should carry weight even for Roman Catholics, because they are two of the four theologians whom the Church of Rome recognizes as 'Doctors of the Church'.

The first Church Council to even *consider* the formation of the canon of The New Testament met in 393, and it was never left to any church council to determine which books should be recognized as inspired scriptures. All that such meetings did - or could do - was to recognize and place on record, the names of the books that were already accepted by the general consent of the entire Church, in both East and West.

And when you consider that many of those early believers lived in times when the possession of a piece of scripture was an offence punishable by death, it is easy to recognize that they would not be prepared to run such a risk in order to possess a counterfeit letter, or a spurious gospel.

For centuries unbelievers, in one way or another, have attacked the Word of God and no other book could have withstood the opposition that has been borne by the Bible. We should not expect it to cease in our own time.

The Protestant Huguenots of France, centuries ago, were cruelly persecuted because of their love of the Bible. They had a banner, which depicted an anvil around which was scattered broken hammers. Their motto read:

***"Hammer away, ye hostile bands!
Your hammers break; God's Anvil stands!"***

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