

## Influences bearing on the Development of the Canon

By the close of the second century, a high degree of agreement concerning the greater part of the New Testament prevailed among the very diverse and scattered congregations of believers in the Mediterranean world and the wider area from Britain to Mesopotamia.

By the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, the great majority of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament canon were almost universally acknowledged to be authoritative.

There is a difference between the **canonicity** of a book and the **authority** of that book.

### **A book's canonicity depends on its authority.**

When Paul writes to the Corinthians, his letter is to be acknowledged as possessing divine authority.

1 Cor 14:37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.

This letter had divine authority from the moment he wrote it!

A book's divine authority comes from its inspiration. It is God-breathed!

A book attains canonicity as it gains general acceptance as a divine work.

No church council can make the books of the Bible authoritative.

The books of the Bible possess their own authority!

The church does not control the canon; the canon controls the church.

As a child identifies its mother, the church identified the books which it saw as having divine authority.

The following material is taken from the book titled The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance by Bruce Metzger.

There were several influences – movements, persons – that exerted pressure on the early Church to ascertain exactly which books were authoritative.

1. **Gnosticism:** one of the chief opponents of orthodox Christianity in the first four centuries. Their main teaching was that elect souls, being divine sparks temporarily imprisoned in physical bodies as a result of a precosmic catastrophe, can obtain salvation by means of a special “gnosis” or knowledge of their origin and destiny. The church countered the claims of the Gnostics by stating that nothing that they taught could be found in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, or the epistles of Paul. In response, the Gnostics pointed to a number of their own “gospels” that they wrote for this express purpose. One example of this is the Gospel of Thomas.

2. **Marcion:** In July 144, a wealthy ship owner who had come from a port along the Black Sea came to Rome to expound his teachings to the church leaders there. It was a strange kind of Christianity that quickly took root throughout large sections of the Roman Empire and by the end of the second century had become a serious threat to the Christian church.

The main points of Marcion's teaching were the rejection of the Old Testament and a distinction between the "Supreme God" of goodness and an inferior "god" of justice, who was the creator and god of the Jews. He taught that the Old and New Testaments cannot be reconciled to each other.

Marcion therefore rejected the entire Old Testament. He accepted as authoritative the nine epistles sent by Paul to seven churches as well as the one to Philemon. For some unexplained reason, Marcion also felt that the only Gospel he could trust was Luke's.

Marcion's "canon" accelerated the process of fixing the church's canon, a process that was already underway in the first half of the second century. It was in opposition to Marcion's criticism that the church first became fully conscious of its inheritance of apostolic writings.

"Marcion forced orthodox Christians to examine their own presuppositions and to state more clearly what they already believed."

3. **Montanism:** a significant factor in the "hardening" of the canon of the New Testament was the influence of Montanism, an enthusiastic and apocalyptic movement that broke out in the second half of the second century. It originated in Asia Minor and quickly spread through the whole church, both East and West. It claimed to be a religion of the Holy Spirit and was marked by ecstatic outbursts which it regarded as the only true form of Christianity.

Montanism first appeared in the year 156 when Montanus fell into a trance soon after his conversion and began to speak in tongues. He announced that he was the inspired instrument of a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Associated with Montanus were two women who left their husbands to join the mission of Montanus.

The fundamental conviction of their "new prophecy" was that the Heavenly Jerusalem was shortly to descend upon earth and be located in a little town called Pepuza. There the three of them settled and began to utter prophetic oracles. Their pronouncements were written down and gathered together as sacred documents similar to the words of Old Testament prophets or the sayings of Jesus.

Along with their vivid expectation of the near approach of the end of the world, the Montanists also developed ascetic traits and disciplinary rigor. And they put women in positions of leadership.

Montanism produced its own "sacred" scriptures, and developed in the church a mistrust of apocalyptic literature that caused a backlash against the book of Revelation.

4. **Persecutions:** When police came to confiscate their scriptures, Christians wanted to be on solid ground as to precisely which books were ones for which they were prepared to suffer and die.