

HOW WE GOT OUR NEW TESTAMENT

HOMER A. KENT, JR.
Dean, Grace Theological Seminary

Thousands of new books flood the current market each year. Behind each one is an author or publisher with an idea, a story, a message, a motive. After hours of writing, rewriting and editing, the book goes onto the market--perhaps to flourish for a time and then fade, or to hide in the ranks of obscurity, or, in a few cases, to become a best seller.

But behind the New Testament, which completes the world's best seller of all time, lies a unique story of a Book written not only by the hand of men, but by the hand of God--a Book which speaks with an authority unknown to other books and which is as up-to-date today as when it was written two thousand years ago.

How was the New Testament written? Why was it written? When? And how can we be sure it is authoritative from beginning to end? These are questions every Christian ought to be able to answer.

The first of the New Testament documents did not appear until about fifteen years after the death of our Lord. As long as Jesus lived on earth His followers felt no need for any new written documents. The Old Testament was their Scripture. It had been fully accepted by Jesus. Its teachings were amplified by His ministry and, in many instances, its prophecies were dramatically fulfilled by incidents in His life.

Even in the opening years of the apostolic era after Christ's ascension there was no immediate need for new sacred literature. Those who first proclaimed the good news of salvation by the death and resurrection of Christ had known Jesus personally. They had seen His miracles, had heard His teachings and were announcing this message in a land where Jesus Himself had been widely known. There was no call for a verification of these facts by appealing to documents. But as the first century moved toward its midpoint and beyond, death claimed more and more of the eyewitnesses. Now the demand for written records of the life of Christ began to grow, and this demand was being supplied from many sources (cf. Luke 1:1). Confusion was certain to result unless some authoritative documents could be secured.

In the light of this situation the twenty-seven books that now make up our New Testament began to appear. James and Galatians seem to have been among the earliest--perhaps around

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A.D. 45-50. Almost all were written within the first thirty years after the death and resurrection of Christ, although the Gospel of John and Revelation did not appear until somewhere around A.D. 90.

Eight or nine different men contributed to the New Testament. Four of them were apostles (Matthew, John, Peter, Paul). Two were half-brothers of Jesus (James, Jude). One was a Gentile and the second largest contributor in bulk to the New Testament (Luke, writer of Luke and Acts). Another was Mark, a companion of Peter and at various times an assistant to Paul, although he was not personally an apostle. The identity of one author is uncertain, although many in the early church accepted the epistle as Paul's (Epistle to the Hebrews).

From a mechanical standpoint, the making of a book in those times bore little resemblance to the perfected publishing techniques of today. Papyrus was the usual writing material of the first three centuries of the Christian era, and it is most likely that the original manuscripts of the various New Testament books took this form. The inner bark of the papyrus plant was split, with strips laid side by side and then a second layer placed crosswise upon them. These were moistened with water or glue, pressed and dried. Sheets were glued side by side and then rolled into the well-known scroll. A later development was the codex, in which the sheets were stacked and then sewed along the left edge, producing a form much like the modern book.

Did the New Testament writers know they were writing sacred Scriptures? It is commonly stated, especially by liberal critics, that the writers were conscious only of specific local needs and did not suppose that they were writing for all Christians, nor that their writings possessed the same sacred character as the Old Testament. These critics say that the sacredness of the documents was a much later concept imposed by a grateful church.

Such statements usually reflect an inadequate view of Biblical inspiration. In addition they ignore the testimony of the documents themselves.

Paul indicates that Luke's Gospel was regarded as Scripture, to be cited with the same authority as the Old Testament. In I Timothy 5:18 he cites as "scripture" both Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7. This is all the more significant when we realize that Paul wrote his comment probably no more than five years after the writing of Luke.

Peter also refers to Paul's epistles as "scripture" and even suggests a collection of Paul's epistles (II Pet. 3:15, 16) in existence. It is clear that the recognition of certain New Testament writings as inspired Scripture was not a gradual process but was understood well within the lifetime of the writers.

It also seems clear that the writers themselves possessed an awareness that they were spokesmen for God in a direct sense: "Which things we speak. . .in the words. . .which the Holy Ghost teacheth" (I Cor. 2:13). "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord" (I Thess. 4:15). Permeating their writings is an inner conviction that these documents are authoritative for the church because God Himself is their source.

As the Christian era progressed it was inevitable that a variety of literature would soon appear. Much of this Christian writing was entirely orthodox. But some was issued to promote special interests of heretical groups. Many of these documents were well-intentioned but factually inaccurate. Luke's Gospel (1:1-4) implies that the large body of literature on the life of Christ which was circulating in his day was fragmentary. Sooner or later the wheat would have to be distinguished from the chaff. The problem came into sharp focus when the heretic Marcion around A.D. 140 promulgated a list of only eleven books as Scripture (ten letters of Paul, and an edited Luke).

The church has applied the term "canon" to the list of books which are recognized as Scripture. The word itself means a straight rod, or reed, and developed the meaning of a "ruler." As applied to the New Testament, it came to designate those particular books which were recognized as providing the norms and standards for the church and thus were to be regarded as authoritative Scripture.

Who decided which books belonged to the canon? Many have the idea that the church or its leaders took some official action which accorded canonical status to our twenty-seven books. However, the earliest decree of any church council regarding the complete canon was made at the Council of Hippo in A.D. 393 (and was repeated by the third Council of Carthage in A.D. 397).

The wording of this resolution is significant: "Besides the canonical Scriptures, nothing shall be read in the church under the title of 'divine writings.' The canonical books are. . . ." (both Old and New Testament books are listed). Now it is clear that this council did not in any sense create the canon. Rather, the statement assumes that the canon already existed and was recognized, and the council merely confirmed the prevailing opinion of the churches. This conciliar decree made no innovation.

Nearly three hundred years before the Council of Hippo, Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church in Corinth, A.D. 96. In it he frequently cited the canonical writings of Paul, Matthew and perhaps some others to reinforce his argument. It is important to note that he shows no like concern for any writings other than our New Testament books, even though there were such in existence. The tenor of Clement's writing shows his recognition of one series of books which was valued similarly to the Old Testament.

In A.D. 367 Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, listed as canonical books the same twenty-seven which we know. Yet his list was not a new pronouncement. Thus prior to any official council, the church was well aware of a canon of Scripture.

We must conclude that recognition of the canon was the experience of the church as a whole, virtually from the time of the writers and their first readers. The same Spirit who inspired the writers also quickened the sensitivity of the readers to recognize a unique authority attached to this particular series of books.

How did the church recognize the canon? It is true theologically that only those writings which were inspired of God were to be regarded as Scripture. But how was this feature to be detected? It seems assured from the records of early church leaders that apostolic authority

was the chief criterion. Those New Testament books written by men who were not apostles were accorded apostolic authority because their authors were companions of the apostles. Mark was regarded as Peter's protege, Luke as Paul's associate, James and Jude as members of the apostolic circle at Jerusalem.

That apostolic authority was a valid test is assured from the statements of Christ Himself who said to the Twelve: "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said to you" (John 14:26). "Ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:27). "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth. . .and he will show you things to come" (John 16:13).

Other tests of canonicity were sometimes appealed to, such as the use of the books in all geographical areas of the church. The criterion was especially helpful for such writings as Philemon and II and III John. Whether a book was spiritually edifying and consistent in doctrine with the Old Testament and other New Testament writings were also factors considered.

By the end of the fourth century there was no further debate over the limits of the canon in the Western church. In the East a few books were still debated for another century, but eventually all major segments of the church agreed on our twenty-seven books.

Some may ask whether we possess the true text of the New Testament, granted that the twenty-seven books are the right ones. This is a problem because none of the autographs still exist and all handcopied documents are subject to errors from human frailty.

The materials for ascertaining the actual text are found in three sources. First, and most important are the Greek manuscripts which contain the New Testament in the language in which it was written. There are over four thousand of these, some of them fragmentary, but many containing the entire New Testament. The oldest one of all is Papyrus 52, a scrap two and a half by three and a half inches containing a portion of John 18:31-33, 37-38, and dated around A. D. 125.

A second source of information is found in the translations of the text which were made early in the Christian era and are thus a reflection of what the Greek text was like very early in its existence. The versions most helpful are the Latin, the Syriac and the Coptic. The scholar must always be alert when considering evidence from the versions whether the variant reading is only a free translation or actually reflects a different Greek text.

The third source is found in the writings of the ancient Church Fathers who often quoted New Testament passages in their writings. Thus we are given information as to what kind of text was current in a certain part of the church and at a given time. One must beware, however, of quotations which have been rather loosely rendered, perhaps from a faulty memory.

When the evidence from the above sources is compared, a grouping into families is possible. Scholars today have been able to distinguish four or five text-types by this method. Alexandrian, Western, Byzantine, Syriac and perhaps Caesarean are recognized by scholars

generally as being distinct enough to warrant such classification. Almost all Biblical scholars today conclude that the Alexandrian family represents the most accurate text because of its great age, and because such manuscripts of this family as codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus show signs of a high proportion of correct readings and originate in a part of the world which was noted for its textual studies.

Although it would probably be going too far to suggest that one group of manuscripts alone is to be relied upon, it is not without significance that the more recent finds among the papyri support the general conclusions noted above. For example, the recently discovered Papyrus 75, a codex of Luke and John dated A.D. 175-225, has a text very similar to Codex Vaticanus. It is the oldest known copy of Luke.

It should be recognized that the vast majority of variants in the manuscripts have to do with such things as spelling differences, word order and other minor matters. With the wealth of documentary evidence at our disposal for determining the true text, biblical scholars are in a much better position than are textual scholars of any other ancient literature. It is highly unlikely that the true text has been lost at any point. The places in the text that may be subject to some remaining doubt are exceedingly few (Westcott and Hort computed them as one-tenth of one percent of the whole).

Even the differences among the major text-types are primarily concerned with minutiae. To illustrate, the difference between Byzantine and Alexandrian families is reflected by the difference between the King James Version and the American Standard Version. Yet Christians recognize that the real substance of the text is not endangered by either version.

Christians today are the possessors of a New Testament that has a remarkable history. It was promised by Christ, who said He would empower the apostles to be His witnesses. It was written at a time when the Koine Greek language, the international language of the Roman Empire, was virtually worldwide. And it has been preserved in thousands of manuscripts to assure us that we have the very words that Christ desired for His believers.