

# Week 6: Why Trust the New Testament Canon?

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Objective: Explore how the books of the New Testament were recognized, collected, and preserved, and affirm their divine authority and trustworthiness.

## Introduction – 5 minutes

Opening Question: “How do we know the right books are in the New Testament?”

- Skeptics claim the Bible was chosen by men, altered by politics, or edited for control.
- Many cultural references reinforce or promote suspicion about the canon.
  - The Da Vinci Code - claims that Christianity “suppressed” other gospels and the true story of Christ (he was mortal, married to Mary Magdalene, etc.)
- Key clarification: The church did not CREATE Scripture; it RECOGNIZED Scripture.
  - Courtroom analogy - a judge does not invent the law but recognizes and applies it. The early church functioned the same way with Scripture.
- Goal of the lesson: To understand the historical process and theological confidence behind the NT canon.

So, how did the early church recognize God’s Word - and how do we know they got it right?

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## What Is the Canon? – 5 minutes

- “Canon” comes from a Greek word meaning “rule” or “measuring rod.”
- The canon is the collection of books recognized as divinely inspired Scripture.
  - Authority comes from God, not the church.
- Biblical self-awareness of Scripture:
  - **Luke 10:16** Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me; but whoever rejects me rejects him who sent me.
    - Jesus equates apostolic teaching with His own authority
  - **1 Timothy 5:18** For Scripture says, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.”
    - Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7
    - Paul quotes Luke’s Gospel as Scripture
  - **2 Peter 3:15-16** And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.
    - Peter refers to Paul’s letters as Scripture

**Key point:** The NT was treated as Scripture while it was being written.

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## Criteria for Recognizing Canonical Books – 15 minutes

Early Christians used consistent criteria:

1. Apostolic Origin
  - a. Written by apostles or close companions
    - i. Mark with Peter; Luke with Paul
  - b. Apostles were authorized eyewitnesses
    - i. Choosing Matthias **Acts 1:21–22** Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.
  - c. Illustration: A “lost letter of George Washington” would be judged by authorship and proximity.
2. Consistency with Existing Revelation
  - a. Agreement with Old Testament theology and apostolic teaching
  - b. Rejection of books promoting secret knowledge or contradictory doctrine
  - c. Contrast: Gnostic writings vs. biblical theology
3. Widespread and Early Acceptance
  - a. “Universal” means cross-regional, consistent use - not instant unanimity
  - b. Core books (Gospels, Paul’s letters) accepted earliest
  - c. Some books questioned briefly but never rejected for heresy
4. Evidence of Divine Inspiration
  - a. Spiritual authority, transformative power, prophetic truth
  - b. Augustine: “The canon is self-authenticating through the voice of God in Scripture.”

**Key Point:** So, if a book is apostolic, consistent, widely used, and spiritually authoritative, it belongs. If not, it doesn’t.

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## Development of the New Testament Canon – 5 minutes

- Timeline
  - AD 30-60: Oral apostolic preaching
  - AD 50-95: New Testament books written
  - AD 95: Clement of Rome quotes NT books as Scripture
  - AD 110: Ignatius and Polycarp cite NT writings
  - AD 170: Muratorian Fragment lists most NT books
  - AD 180: Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon, writes *Against Heresies*, affirming the fourfold Gospel and quoting nearly every NT book
  - AD 250: Origen distinguishes accepted vs. disputed books

- AD 367: Athanasius lists all 27 NT books
- AD 397: Council of Carthage confirms what was already recognized

**Key Point:** The New Testament wasn't formed by simply excluding books. It formed by recognizing which books were already being used and trusted across Christian communities. By the time anyone argued about the canon, most of it had already been settled in practice!

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## Refuting Common Myths – 5 minutes

- “Constantine decided the Bible at Nicaea”
    - False. Nicaea addressed Christology, not canon
    - Constantine convened the council – he had recently legalized Christianity and wanted to promote unity in the Empire.
    - Most NT books recognized before Constantine’s birth
    - As a side note, they did issue the Nicene Creed, a formal statement of faith that clarified orthodox belief about:
      - God the Father
      - Jesus Christ as fully God
      - Key elements of Christian belief
  - “There are missing books of the Bible”
    - Numerous ancient writings exist, but age, authorship, and theology matter
    - Comparison: Canonical Gospels vs. Gnostic Gospels
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## What alternatives arose? Gnosticism – 10 minutes

1. What Gnosticism Was
  - a. “Gnosis” = means knowledge or awareness
  - b. It is not a singular, homogeneous tradition or religion, but an umbrella term used by modern scholars to describe different groups and beliefs that shared certain characteristics.
  - c. In a religious context, gnosis is mystical or esoteric knowledge based on direct participation with the divine.
    - i. Often, it refers to knowledge based on personal experience or perception.
  - d. Gnosticism rejects the material world as a product of error and seeks to return to a higher realm of being.
    - i. In a nutshell, matter is evil; spirit is good.
  - e. Gnostic doctrine taught that the world was created and ruled by a lesser divinity, the demiurge, and that Christ was an emissary of another remote supreme divine being, esoteric knowledge (gnosis) of whom enabled the redemption of the human spirit.

i. The Apocryphon of John (aka the secret book of John) describes creation:

1. The ultimate source of all reality is the invisible, transcendent great spirit, or Father, who is perfect, unknowable, and beyond being. He creates Barbelo, the mother of all creation. They proceed to create the "aeons," or aspects of the great spirit. The aeons dwell with the great spirit in the "pleroma."

One aeon, Sophia (Wisdom), becomes curious and wants to create for herself. However, she acts without consent of the great spirit and gives rise to an imperfect being, Yaldabaoth, who lacked the divine light. Too impure to dwell in the pleroma, Yaldabaoth was cast into the lower heavens.

Angry and arrogant, he declares himself the ruler of this dark, empty realm. Out of his pride, he begins to shape the physical universe. To assist him, he also creates a group of subordinate rulers (archons) who help govern it.

Yet the world was lifeless, so Yaldabaoth steals a spark of divine light from the higher realm and placed it inside Adam. This divine spark represents humanity's true origin and potential and was the only source of goodness in this corrupt physical world. The archons attempt to keep humanity ignorant and enslaved through deception, distraction, desire, and fear.

This is why man was placed in the garden of Eden – a place where every need was provided for. Meanwhile, Sophia grieves over her mistake, so she created Eve and sent her down to live with Adam. Eve eats the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and their eyes are opened – they realize their true, divine nature. Yaldabaoth becomes enraged and expels them from the garden

Salvation comes through gnosis (knowledge) or enlightenment: awakening to one's divine origin and recognizing the false authority of the creator god. Christ descends from the higher realm to reveal this hidden knowledge, enabling souls to escape the material world and return to the divine fullness of pleroma

- ii. In summary: in Gnosticism, creation is a mistake, salvation is escape, and Jesus is a messenger - not a Savior.

f. Teaching line: Gnosticism didn't deny Jesus - it redefined Him.

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2. How Gnosticism Differs from Christianity

Christianity	Gnosticism
Creation is good	Matter is evil
Incarnation is central	Incarnation is impossible
Public gospel	Secret knowledge
Resurrection of the body	Escape from the body

a. Key verse contrasts:

i. vs. Docetism

1. Docetism: the belief that Jesus only seemed to be human, and that his human form was an illusion.

a. A truly divine being cannot unite with matter without being contaminated.

b. God entering a physical body would contradict God's purity.

2. **John 1:14** "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

ii. Physical resurrection vs. spiritual-only salvation **1 Corinthians 15**

1. (v.12) How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

2. (v.16) If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised.

3. (v.17) If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.

iii. Books written against Gnosticism: 1 John, 2 John, Colossians, also 1 & 2 Timothy

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3. Why Gnostic Books Failed the Canon Test

a. They failed because they:

- i. Appeared later
- ii. Claimed false apostolic authorship
- iii. Contradicted Jewish monotheism
- iv. Undermined the gospel itself

**Key Point:** These books weren't excluded for being different - they were excluded for being *un-Christian*. Now you can see why certain books sounded Christian - but weren't.

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**Addressing Disputed and Rejected Books – 15 minutes**

1. Disputed but Accepted Books

- a. Hebrews - unknown human author, but early and consistent apostolic teaching
- b. James - questioned due to misunderstandings about faith and works, not theology
- c. Revelation - symbolic style caused hesitation in some regions
- d. **Point:** Honest debate demonstrates discernment, not conspiracy

Now let's put everything together - criteria, history, and theology - and test a few real books.

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## 2. Specific Rejected Books, Their Content, and the Rationale

- a. Gospel of Thomas (c. AD 140–180)
  - i. Summary: A collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, emphasizing hidden wisdom.
  - ii. Example Passage: “Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.”
  - iii. Why Rejected:
    - 1. Late, non-apostolic origin
    - 2. Gnostic theology (salvation through secret knowledge)
    - 3. Contradicts the public gospel message (John 3:16; Romans 10:9-13)
    - 4. Bonus example “Every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”
- b. Gospel of Peter (c. AD 120–150)
  - i. Summary: A passion narrative claiming to describe Jesus’ trial, death, and resurrection.
  - ii. Example Passage: Jesus “remained silent, as if he felt no pain,”
  - iii. Why Rejected:
    - 1. False claim to apostolic authorship
    - 2. Promotes Docetism (denial of Jesus’ true humanity), which contradicts Isaiah 53, Hebrews 2:14, 1 Peter 2:24
    - 3. Also, the cross follows Jesus out of the tomb and speaks.
- c. Infancy Gospel of Thomas (c. AD 140–170)
  - i. Summary: Stories describing Jesus’ childhood miracles.
  - ii. Example Passage: A boy bumps into young Jesus, so Jesus curses him, causing the child’s death.
  - iii. Why Rejected:
    - 1. Portrays a distorted, immoral character of Jesus
    - 2. Contradicts Luke 2:52 and Hebrews 4:15
    - 3. Legendary embellishment rather than historical reporting
    - 4. Bonus example: He also strikes teachers blind when they correct him.
- d. Shepherd of Hermas (c. AD 140)
  - i. Summary: An allegorical work focused on repentance, moral discipline, and church order.

- ii. Example Teaching: After baptism, there is only one opportunity for repentance. Beyond that, forgiveness is uncertain.
- iii. Why Rejected:
  - 1. Written after the apostolic age (Early tradition identifies Hermas as the brother of Bishop Pius I of Rome, placing the work clearly after the apostolic age.)
  - 2. Confusion regarding forgiveness and assurance of grace
  - 3. Useful for instruction but not inspired Scripture
- iv. This book was widely cited by early Christians, but was ultimately viewed more as a 'devotional aid' rather than divine scripture.
- e. Acts of Paul and Thecla (c. AD 160–180)
  - i. Summary: Legendary stories about Paul and a female disciple named Thecla.
  - ii. Example Scene: Thecla survives multiple miraculous executions and animals worship her.
  - iii. Why Rejected:
    - 1. Fictionalized narrative admitted by the author
    - 2. Elevates asceticism (denying one's physical needs) beyond apostolic teaching
    - 3. Rejected despite popularity
    - 4. Also, Tertullian records the author admitted he wrote it "out of love for Paul"

**Key Point:** Rejected books were not excluded arbitrarily. They failed consistent tests of apostolic origin, doctrinal truth, historical reliability, and early acceptance.

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### Why This Matters – 5 minutes

- Confidence that we possess the faith "once delivered" (Jude 3)
- Assurance that God preserves His Word (Isaiah 40:8)
- Strengthens evangelism and answers deconstruction narratives

**Key Point:** If God can inspire Scripture, He can preserve it.

### Class Discussion – 10 minutes

1. What explanations have you heard about how the Bible was formed?
2. Why is recognition better than "selection" when discussing canon?
3. How would you respond to someone who asks about the Gospel of Thomas?
4. How does trust in the canon affect your daily faith?

*Next Week... Assignment: Read 2 Timothy 3 and 2 Peter 1*

*Dealing with Doubt*