

**The Historical Development of the New Testament Canon:  
A Pastoral Perspective**

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# I. Introduction

The New Testament tells us that, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..”<sup>1</sup> It is therefore the divine authorship of the Bible that sets it apart from any other book in the history of the world. Of course many religious books claim this same distinction, so how is one to distinguish the genuine article from the false one? There are certainly widely accepted opinions such as the divine nature of the text, or the impact the text has on its audience. Another such test is the nature of the factors that led to the creation of that text. Using this litmus test, one can clearly see the divine hand of God in the creation and development of the New Testament Canon. Through a variety of divinely appointed circumstances and conditions, a climate was afforded which made the creation of the New Testament Canon possible.

Additionally, this author posits that through these appointed circumstances and conditions, a divine ‘pattern’ can be discerned which God has used and continues to use in the church today to advance His Kingdom. As a pastor of a startup church, the author has experienced and is in the process of experiencing these various phases of development. The phases are as follows; 1.) Ideal conditions 2.) Initial leadership 3.) Codification of core teachings 4.) Growth of membership and leaders 5.) False leaders 6.) Recommitment to core teachings. This paper will seek to explore these phases of development of the New Testament Canon with an eye toward their cumulative effect while comparing and contrasting them with the conditions of modern church development.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. 2 Ti 3:16

## II. Ideal Conditions

For a tree to grow it needs the right soil. This axiom is no less true when planting a church. A critical mass of people with common interests needs to exist, a sufficient body of qualified leaders needs to be available and willing to lead, and a variety of resources such as money and suitable location need to come to fruition. In short, a church is a divine work. We see the divine work of God in creating the proper and necessary conditions to create the New Testament Canon. Several conditions should be brought to light in this regard, the first being the common language of the day. The Greek language, in which the books of the New Testament were written, was representative of the everyday language which was spoken in the entire Hellenistic world. It was exactly this element of universality within the known world at that time which also gave it a specific epithet "Koine" (Κοινή, common).<sup>2</sup> This common language of the civilized world created the 'track' by which the Canon could be widely distributed and understood. The peculiar rise of Koine Greek and its ease of use show the divine fingerprint of God, in essence, reversing the confusion of speech in Genesis 11:7 to provide for the Diaspora of the divine message. Even today it is unquestioned that from the entire vocabulary of the New Testament there are but a few words which are impossible to be used in the daily Greek today. This fact is amazing, especially as twenty centuries have already elapsed. Concerning this fact, the great linguist of the beginning of the 20th century, Georgios Hatzidakis noted that "such a phenomenon has happened nowhere else."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Greek Orthodox Theological Review 42 no 3-4 Fall-Wint 1997, p 259-271

<sup>3</sup> G N Hatzidakis, *Σύντομος ιστορία τής ελληνικής γλώσσης*(Athens, 1915, 21967), p 108

Secondly, God’s choice of the Israelites to author the majority of the New Testament had been carefully orchestrated from its beginnings as a nation. The Israelites had been given the Law at Mt. Sinai and commanded by God; “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it..”<sup>4</sup> The tradition of reverence and preservation of the written word both biblical and extra biblical, such as through the Mishnah, Talmud and Targums, had earned the Jews the nickname ‘people of the book’. The early church leaders were trained to seek truth in Scripture and to commit core biblical teachings to Scripture. Thus, the initial apostolic church was not without Scripture—it looked for its doctrine to the Old Testament, usually in a Greek dress, though some writers appear to have used the Hebrew text.<sup>5</sup> So, the conditions were present and ripe for the creation of the Canon. What was now needed was prophetic leadership.

### **III. Initial leadership**

A divine work must ultimately come from a person equipped and authorized for such a work by God. When a church is started, its success ultimately derives from the authorization and empowerment of its leaders by God alone. No amount of talent, hard work or lucky breaks can overcome this unassailable truth. As the scripture says, “Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the critical question to be answered is, were the writers of the New Testament equipped and authorized by God? Geisler and Nix aptly state, “In brief, a book is canonical if it is prophetic, that is, if it

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<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. S. Jos 1:8

<sup>5</sup> Wood, D. R. W.: *New Bible Dictionary*. InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, p 170

<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. S. Ps 127:1

was written by a prophet of God. In other words, *propheticity determines canonicity*.”<sup>7</sup> Gesiler and Nix add, “It was they (the disciples) whom Jesus promised: ”The Holy Spirit ... will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you“ (John 14:26) and the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). It was the “apostles’ teaching” in which the early church continued (Acts 2:42) and it was the apostles who were given special signs (miracles) to confirm their message (Heb. 2:3-4).”<sup>8</sup> The authorship and/or teaching of the New Testament is apostolic. By this very fact, the ultimate creation and enduring nature of the New Testament was a guaranteed success. Isaiah states, “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”<sup>9</sup> Edward J. Young writes concerning Scripture, “When the Word of God was written it became Scripture and, inasmuch as it had been spoken by God, possessed absolute authority. Since it was the Word of God, it was canonical. That which determines the canonicity of a book, therefore, is the fact that the book is inspired by God.”<sup>10</sup> So we see that the initial apostles were prophets chosen by God to author the Canon of God’s Word which was to be handed to them by God.

## **IV. Codification of Core teachings**

One of the critical development stages of a church is to codify what it is they believe. This often takes place through the formulation of a statement of faith which is a summation of core doctrinal points, a mission statement which articulates the general and specific mission that

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<sup>7</sup> Geisler, Norman L. ; Nix, William E.: *A General Introduction to the Bible*. Rev. and expanded. Chicago : Moody Press, 1996, c1986, p. 212

<sup>8</sup> Geisler, Norman L. ; Nix, William E. p. 212

<sup>9</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. S. Is 55:11

<sup>10</sup> Edward J. Young, "The Canon of the Old Testament," in Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958, p. 156.

the church has been called to, and a statement of values which articulates how the church does ministry. This process is often a transmission and articulation of beliefs and values from residence in the initial leaders' heads onto the written page. This developmental stage is critical because it helps visitors and prospective members to get a clear grasp of what that church is all about. Without clearly articulated doctrine, mission and values, there lies the potential for great conflict in the future. This is because people who have widely varying beliefs and strategies for ministry eventually will come to power. We see in this initial codification of core teachings this exact process. The commitment to Scripture of apostolic teaching by the Apostles becomes the foundation by which the Church shall operate through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Initially, we see the germination of the scriptures in the development of the core teachings by the Apostles in the pre-writing stage of the scriptures. 1 Cor 15:3-4 and Acts 10:36-40 show the church consciously preserving its traditions of the passion, resurrection life and teachings of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

The first intentional gathering of a corpus of scriptural material is through the organization of the letters of Paul.”<sup>12</sup> Wood remarks, “The collection of a corpus of letters evidently post-dates the death of Paul: the Pauline corpus is textually homogeneous and there is more weighty evidence for the suggestion, most thoroughly developed by E. J. Goodspeed, that its collection was a single act at a specific date (probably about A.D. 80-85), than for the earlier view of Harnack that the corpus grew slowly. The corpus from the start would enjoy high status as a body of authoritative Christian literature.”<sup>13</sup>

We see in these writings that the initial call for apostolic authority was from the writings itself. Walter Elwell remarks, “At the close of his First Letter to the Thessalonians,

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<sup>11</sup> Wood, D. R. W. p. 170

<sup>12</sup> Elwell, Walter A. ; Comfort, Philip Wesley: *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, 2001 (Tyndale Reference Library), S. 173

<sup>13</sup> Wood, D. R. W. p.170

possibly the first book of the NT to be written, Paul says, “I command you in the name of the Lord to read this letter to all the brothers and sisters” (1 Thes 5:27, nlt). Earlier in the same letter Paul commends their ready acceptance of his spoken word as “the word of God” (2:13), and in 1 Corinthians 14:37 he speaks similarly of his “writings,” insisting that his message be recognized as a commandment from the Lord himself.”<sup>14</sup> The aging of the other apostles also prompted their writing down of the teachings that they had received from Jesus Christ. The Church of Rome asked Mark to write down what he has been taught by Peter. Luke, who had traveled with Paul also wrote a Gospel as well as an account of the ministry of the Apostles. We also see John writing His Gospel around the turn of the century and Matthew writing a Gospel for the Jewish Community.

## **V. Growth of Membership and Leadership**

The test of a church is how it handles success and succession. As a church begins to grow, new members and leaders begin to influence the church. If the foundation of the church is in fact on Christ and His Word, that church will be able to flourish through this period of growth. As the early church grew, new leaders arose that took the place of the Apostles who had fallen asleep. The Church Fathers were disciples of the Apostles and not only had access to their teachings in written form, but additionally, the first Fathers had been personally mentored through the use of these Scriptures. We see in these leaders faithfulness to the teachings of the Apostles as the foundation of the rule and faith of the Church.

Ignatius of Antioch wrote seven epistles to the churches while traveling to be martyred in Rome. Although he did not give references to particular citations from the

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<sup>14</sup> Elwell, Walter A. p. 173



Scriptures, he did make many loose quotations and allusions to them.<sup>15</sup> Ignatius also included the use of the term ‘Gospel’ of which it is thought he was referencing the four gospels. Clement, a contemporary of the apostles, writing in his letter, *First Epistle*, (c. 90) quotes material akin to the Synoptics yet in a form not strictly identical with any particular Gospel.<sup>16</sup> Clement also wrote his epistle *Corinthians* (c. 95-97) after the pattern of the apostle Paul.<sup>17</sup> Polycarp, the disciple of John, referred to the New Testament several times in his *Epistle to the Philippians* (c. 110-135). He introduces Galatians 4:26 as “the word of truth” (chap. 3) and citations of Philippians 2:16 and 2 Timothy 4:10 as “the word of righteousness” (chap. 9). In chapter 12, Polycarp cites numerous Old and New Testament passages as “the Scriptures.”<sup>18</sup>

In the second century we see Church Fathers continuing to rely on and expound upon the scriptures. In his first *Apology* (c.150-155), Justin Martyr regarded the gospels as the “Voice of God” (chap. 65). He further stated of the Scriptures, “We must not suppose that the language proceeds from men who were inspired, but from the Divine Word which moves them” (*Apology* 1.36).”<sup>19</sup>

Irenaeus (c.130-202) in his book *Against Heresies* stated, “For the Lord of all gave the power of the Gospel to his apostles, through whom we have come to know the truth, that is, the teaching of the Son of God . . . . This Gospel they first preached. Afterwards, by the will of

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<sup>15</sup> Geisler, Norman L. ; Nix, William E. p. 100

<sup>16</sup> Wood, D. R. W. p.170

<sup>17</sup> Wood, D. R. W. p.170

<sup>18</sup> Geisler, Norman L. ; Nix, William E. p. 100

<sup>19</sup> Geisler, Norman L. ; Nix, William E. p. 100

God, they handed it down to us in the Scriptures, to be “the pillar and ground” of our faith.”<sup>20</sup>

Tatian’s *Diatessaron* was a gospel harmony based on the four canonical gospels (although integrating some apocryphal material as well); it was created around the year 170 C.E.; and it was in general use in the eastern churches until the beginning of the fifth century.<sup>21</sup> The fact that it was the four gospels that Tatian was trying to integrate shows the place of authority they already had in the Christian community.

## VI. False Leaders

One of the greatest challenges to the church lies not from outside the church but inside of it. Paul, upon leaving the Ephesian church warned the Elders saying, “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.<sup>30</sup> Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away Disciples after them.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, it is the rise of false leaders that God used in the master plan of forming and solidifying the New Testament Canon. The rise of Gnosticism presented challenges to the early church as Gnostic leaders sought to sway believers to their way of thinking. Marcion and Basilidies claimed that they were the true Christians who possessed a deeper wisdom. Basilidies claimed to represent the teachings of Peter while Marcion claimed to represent the teachings of Paul. To that end Marcion developed his own canon of scripture to represent his divergent thoughts. Concerning the contents Philip Shaff states, “Marcion formed a canon of his own, which consisted of only eleven books, an abridged and mutilated Gospel of Luke, and ten of Paul’s epistles. He put

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<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, 3:67.

<sup>21</sup> Harvard Theological Review 95 no1 73-96 Ja 2002

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. S. Ac 20:29-30

Galatians first in order, and called Ephesians the Epistle to the Laodiceans. He rejected the pastoral epistles, in which the forerunners of Gnosticism are condemned, the Epistle to the Hebrews, Matthew, Mark, John, the Acts, the Catholic Epistles, and the Apocalypse.”<sup>23</sup> From a pastoral perspective, The Marcion Canon had to provide an impetus to the church to begin to move toward codifying the set of books it considered canonical. Without doing so, it left the church open to false leaders who would sway the flock with their version of the truth. However, the fact that it took some time to do so indicates that there was already a generally accepted set of canonical books in use at the time. This set simply had not been given official canonical status of the church possibly due to the fact that there were a variety of fringe books that enjoyed quasi canonical status.

Before moving toward codifying a set Canon another issue had to be dealt with and that was the question of prophetic office. Ironically, another leadership conflict with the false teacher Montanus spurred on the resolution of this question. The Montanus conflict was an impetus toward the recognition of a closed canon of the written Word of God.<sup>24</sup> Montanus taught that the prophetic gift had been granted to the church and he was its prophet. As such, he had the ability to dictate to all bishops the words of God to the church. The result of such a brazen headlong assault on apostolic authority was the need to identify who did actually have the authority to speak for the church. Walter Ellwell writes, “The pressure to deal with Montanism, therefore, intensified the search for a basic authority, and apostolic authorship or approval became recognized as the only sure standard for identifying God’s revelation. Even within the Scripture record, first-century

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<sup>23</sup>Schaff, Philip ; Schaff, David Schley: *History of the Christian Church*. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997

<sup>24</sup> Ellwell, Walter A. p. 174

prophets were subordinate and subject to apostolic authority.’’<sup>25</sup> With the decision regarding apostolic authorship/approval in place and the implicit challenge presented by Marcion, the church was equipped and ready to move forward in choosing and finalizing the closed New Testament Canon.

## VII. Recommitment to core teachings

A church is challenged when false leaders and foreign ideas shake up the set assumptions and beliefs that reside in the church. If it can survive the assault, that church will emerge from that time stronger because it has been tested and found to be on a firm foundation. The Lord used the challenges of Gnosticism, Marcionism as well as persecutions to strengthen the church and force it to plant its roots firmly on the teaching of the Apostles. The Muratorian Canon (AD 170) represents the first recorded official attempt to codify the Canon. The fragment of the Canon that was discovered is the remaining section of a list of all the works that were accepted as by the churches known to its anonymous original compiler.<sup>26</sup> The Muratorian Canon included all the New Testament books except Hebrews, James, and one epistle of John.<sup>27</sup> The Canon also included books such as the Apocalypse of Peter and the Shepherd of Hermes. From this list we see that already, the Canon is not far from being in its completed state.

Eusebius (AD 270–340) helped to further refine the Muratorian Canon by splitting the lists of books into three lists. He sets forth his case in *Ecclesiastical History* (3.3-25)<sup>28</sup>. Universally agreed upon as canonical were the four Gospels, Acts, letters of Paul

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<sup>25</sup> Elwell, Walter A. p. 174

<sup>26</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muratorian\\_fragment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muratorian_fragment)

<sup>27</sup> Enns, Paul P.: *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago, Ill. : Moody Press, 1997, c1989, p. 172

<sup>28</sup> Eusebius. *The History of the Church*. New York: Penguin, 1989, p. 65, 88

(including Hebrews, with question about his authorship), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. Admitted by a majority, including Eusebius himself, but disputed by some were James, 2 Peter (the most strongly contested), 2 and 3 John, and Jude. Finally, The Acts of Paul, the Didache, and Shepherd of Hermas were classified “spurious,” and still other writings were listed as “heretical and absurd.”<sup>29</sup>

In 367, we see a distillation of all the previous work of the church in the finalized version of the Canon. This Canon was published in An Easter festal letter by Athanasius. In it he lists the 27 books alone as canonical. Final authorization of this list is seen at the Synod of Hippo in A.D. 393 and the Synod of Carthage in A.D. 397.

## **VIII. Conclusions**

Much like the development of the church today, the set of circumstances that led to the development of the Canon cannot be anything less than divine. It is the hand of God that ensured the ultimate success of the 27 books that we have in our possession today. Modern day revisionists and critics claim that the Church was the real deciding factor in which books were included, and the ultimate motivation behind Canon selection was as a tool by which to dominate its followers. In reality, there can be nothing further from the truth. Louis Gaussen accurately writes, “In this affair, then, the Church is a servant and not a mistress; a depository and not a judge. She exercises the office of a minister, not of a magistrate.... She delivers a testimony, not a judicial sentence. She discerns the canon of the Scriptures, she does not make it; she has recognized their authenticity, she has not given it.... The authority of the Scriptures is not founded, then, on the authority of the Church: It is the Church

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<sup>29</sup> Elwell, Walter A. p. 174

that is founded on the authority of the Scriptures.<sup>30</sup> Because of the Canon's divine authorship and origin, it has managed to stand the test of time and continues to provide the Church with a solid foundation, built on the foundation and the prophets, upon which to stand. The Canon in conclusion is a miraculous book formed in a miraculous way by a miraculous God for the blessing of the people of God.

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<sup>30</sup> Gaussen, L[ouis]. *Theopneustia: The Bible, Its Divine Origin and Entire Inspiration, Deduced from Internal Evidence and the Testimonies of Nature, History, and Science*. Translated from the French by David D. Scott. Edinburgh: 1841. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971, S.137

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