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## The Foundation of New Testament Canonicity

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## Introduction

Protestant evangelical Christianity recognizes the 27 books of the New Testament as part of the word of God, the principle authority for Christian life, superior to the authority of any human church. However, this great esteem for the Scriptures leads many evangelical Christians to treat them like books that simply came down from heaven, and they do not know where they came from or why the church recognizes them as God's word.<sup>1</sup> How did the church come to recognize these 27 books as part of the biblical canon?

This question is significant because Christians must have knowledge of the New Testament's origin to form a strong foundation for their faith in it as God's word, and to give them a basis for rejecting extracanonical books as divinely authoritative. An examination of the positions of different theologians and churches, Scripture, early church history, church councils, and controversial books helps to answer this question. It reveals that the canonicity of the New Testament has not been determined by a modern list of criteria, the will of church leaders, or the decisions of church councils, but by the Holy Spirit's preservation of it and its widespread usage in the early church.

## New Testament Canonicity in Modern Evangelical Theology

### Definition of Canonicity

Charles Ryrie defines the canon as, "the authoritative list of the books of the Bible."<sup>2</sup> Authoritative here refers to the books' status as the inspired word of God. Other extracanonical texts may be of great value in their truth and accuracy, and thus authoritative in a historical or

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Mackie, "Making of the Bible Part 1" (podcast), accessed November 12, 2017, <https://thebibleproject.com/podcast/making-bible-part-1/>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 118.

literary sense, but not spiritually authoritative over Christian life. The word “canon” originally meant “reed,” something which was used as an ancient measuring stick. The completed biblical canon became the measuring stick or standard for the Christian life as a divine, Scriptural authority.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the biblical canon holds so much authority over the church and such a high position as the inspired word of God warrants critical examination of what granted such status to the 27 books of the New Testament.

### Ryrie’s Criteria for Canonicity

Modern evangelical theologians commonly address this issue by giving a list of criteria for New Testament canonicity. Ryrie’s criteria consist of apostolic authority, uniqueness, and acceptance by the churches.<sup>4</sup> The criterion of uniqueness is unique to Ryrie’s list, and somewhat ambiguous since he does not provide much explanation of it in his *Basic Theology*. While the criterion of apostolic authority also occurs frequently in the comments of other theologians and Bible scholars, this raises problems because some books like Luke and Mark were not written by an apostle. Ryrie solves such problems by asserting that apostolic authority covers books written by those who had the approval of an apostle, saying that Luke had Paul’s support and Mark had Peter’s.<sup>5</sup> However, this does not cover Hebrews, a book with an uncertain author.

### Mounce’s Criteria for Canonicity

Bill Mounce, a New Testament Greek scholar, aims to solve this problem in his list. He provides six criteria for canonicity, which include truthfulness, church usage and recognition, and three others which could be reduced to that of apostolic authority. A prophet, apostle, or

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<sup>3</sup> *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Bible Formation and Canon.”

<sup>4</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 123.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

someone associated with them would have to have written the book, or it would need to be confirmed by Christ, a prophet, or an apostle. However, Mounce recognizes that this still does not include the book of Hebrews, and he clarifies that every book does not need to fit all the criteria on his list. Hebrews still qualifies despite its unknown author primarily because of its faithfulness to previously accepted canonical writings, another of Mounce's criteria.<sup>6</sup> Mounce, then, does not consider his list to be true criteria which books needed to meet to qualify for canonicity, but indicators which point to a book's canonicity.

### Mackie's Criteria for Canonicity

Tim Mackie, a pastor and biblical studies professor at Western Seminary in Oregon, provides his own list of three characteristics which books of the New Testament canon possess, not as definitions of canonicity, but as qualities which the church fathers recognized in these books. Like Ryrie and Mounce, he includes connection to an apostle, as well as widespread church usage. For Mackie, the fact that these books "went viral" in the days of the early church is one of the greatest indicators of their canonicity, and one of the greatest reasons the church fathers recognized and confirmed their place in the biblical canon. He also includes conformity to the orthodox Christian teaching of the apostles,<sup>7</sup> which corresponds to Mounce's criterion of truthfulness. Mackie's list is perhaps the most helpful out of the three discussed here because of its strong historical basis, but like the others, it can only describe canonical books, not exhaustively define them.

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Mounce, "What Criteria Were Used to Determine the Canon of Scripture?" Biblical Training, July 10, 2012, accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/blog/curious-christian/7-10-2012/what-criteria-were-used-determine-canon-scripture>.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Mackie, "Making of the Bible Part 3" (podcast), accessed November 12, 2017, <https://thebibleproject.com/podcast/making-bible-part-3/>.

While there are legitimate historical indicators and proofs which were used to recognize a book's canonicity, modern evangelical scholars have difficulty distilling exactly what made a particular book canonical and another not. The differences between their lists and the failure of their criteria to include every book in the New Testament indicate that while such lists are helpful for understanding common characteristics of the books and elements which supported their canonization, they cannot strictly determine a book's canonicity. This is not to suggest that modern evangelical scholars attempt to do this, but rather that their lists cannot be relied upon for this purpose. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* states that, "The designation 'criteria of canonicity' is a modern classification based on observations from the church fathers' writings. The Christian community did not explicitly create these criteria as a set of standards by which it would canonize or reject specific books and letters. They were principles or attributes that guided the Church in its investigation of Scripture."<sup>8</sup> The canonization of the New Testament, then, must have involved more than each of the 27 books meeting a certain list of criteria.

### **New Testament Canonicity in Non-Evangelical Churches**

Perhaps one reason that evangelicals have difficulty in pinpointing exactly what qualifies each book of the New Testament to be included in the canon is because of the Protestant rejection of dogmatic church authority. Many firmly hold that the church submits to biblical authority, and the Bible is not subject to the church. Mounce himself cautions his readers not to assume that the church decreed the authority of the New Testament books, stating rather that church recognized their authority and canonized them.<sup>9</sup> The Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches, however, lean more heavily on church authority, and therefore are able to

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<sup>8</sup> *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Canon, New Testament."

<sup>9</sup> Mounce, "What Criteria Were Used to Determine the Canon of Scripture?"

present more definitive answers on the issue of canonicity. While these answers may be problematic, they can contribute to a greater understanding of how the New Testament was established.

### Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic and Protestant churches disagree about what should be included in the Old Testament canon, since Roman Catholics hold that the books of Tobias, Judith, Baruch, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom, and 1 & 2 Maccabees, as well as additions to Esther and Daniel form part of the canon, while Protestants consider them to be apocryphal.<sup>10</sup> The two churches virtually agree on the exclusive canonicity of the 27 books of the New Testament, but here clarification needs to be made. The Catholic church recognizes two types of books in the canon:

protocanonical and deuterocanonical. Protocanonical books are those which Christians have always received without dispute, like the central Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament.

Deuterocanonical books are those which have had more difficulty being accepted. The Catholic church places the seven Old Testament apocryphal books into this category, as well as the New Testament books of Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and Revelation, and three passages from other books, Mark 16:9-20, Luke 22:43-44, and John 7:53-8:11. These sections of the New Testament were historically controversial and took longer for the church to accept, so while the Catholic Church includes them in the biblical canon and recognizes them as Scripture, it places them in the deuterocanonical category.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>George J. Reid, "Canon of the Holy Scriptures," Catholic Answers, n.d., accessed November 20, 2017, <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/canon-of-the-holy-scriptures>.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

Like many evangelical theologians, a number of Roman Catholic scholars hold to certain criteria for the canonicity of New Testament Scripture. Some point to evangelical character as a key criterion for determining a book's inspiration, while others point to apostolic authority. Advocates of apostolic authority argue that the books' inspiration came from the apostles who were specially indwelt by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. However, some books undoubtedly lack apostolic backing, while others which had (or appeared to have) such backing were excluded from the canon. Most Catholic scholars do not believe that apostolic authority provides sufficient basis for canonization. It is a good indication of a book's authority, but the primary criterion above all others is the doctrinal tradition of inspiration, the church's teaching handed down from the apostles and church fathers that the books of the New Testament were inspired by God. Since the council of Trent in 1546, the inspiration of these books has not been open to question.<sup>12</sup> While the Catholic Church can provide a rich history of the canonization process and several criteria which that process involved, tradition has the last word. Ultimately, the 27 books of the New Testament are undoubtedly inspired because the church recognized them to be so.

#### Greek Orthodox Church

Even though the Greek Orthodox Church holds to a different Old Testament canon than either the Protestant or Catholic churches, adding at least 3 Maccabees to its list, it agrees with both churches about the 27 books of the New Testament canon.<sup>13</sup> Like the Catholic Church, and perhaps more strongly, the Orthodox Church's view of canonicity depends heavily on church authority. While it recognizes the historical process that surrounded the establishment of the canon and sees the study of possible criteria of determination as useful, church tradition is the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Canon of the Bible, Traditions of the."

final doctrinal authority on the subject. Petros Vassiliadis, a Greek Orthodox priest, writes, “It was the church which decided which books would form the canon of the New Testament. A book is not part of holy scripture because of any particular theory about its date and authorship, but because the church treats it as canonical.”<sup>14</sup>

While these statements definitely provide a clear answer to the question of canonicity, they create some problems. The kind of argument which declares that the books of the New Testament are inspired and canonical primarily because the church says they are could also be used by other religions to justify their texts as divinely inspired. This reasoning is somewhat circular and completely cuts off questions and challenges. Furthermore, the fact that the Council of Trent determined the canon to be unquestionable means that the church must refuse to consider the discovery that certain passages were not included in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament books, and thus potentially extracanonical.<sup>15</sup> While Church acceptance and usage can strongly indicate the canonicity of a book, they require further explanation. Why did the early church accept such books as canonical?

## **New Testament Canonicity in Early Church History**

### **Biblical Evidence**

Most of the historical evidence concerning biblical canonicity lies outside of the Bible itself, but a few verses point to how the apostles and the early church handled and thought about the writings which came to form the New Testament. First of all, there is biblical evidence that many attempted to record events from the life of Christ and the beginning of the church early on.

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<sup>14</sup>Petros Vassiliadis, “Reading the Bible from the Orthodox Church Perspective,” *The Ecumenical Review* 51 (January 1999): 28.

<sup>15</sup>Mackie, “Making of the Bible Part 3.”



Luke writes about this at the beginning of his own gospel account (cf. Lk 1:1–2). While it is uncertain whether the other accounts Luke refers to made it into the canon or still exist today, several such works were evidently in progress very early in church history.

Additionally, Scripture reveals that the writings which early individual churches possessed would have contained similarities because of circulation. Although several letters were written to specific churches and people, sharing these among the churches was evidently encouraged. Paul writes to the Colossians, “After you read this letter, make sure that it is read also in the church at Laodicea. At the same time, you are to read the letter that the believers in Laodicea will send you (Col 4:16, *GNT*).” However, elsewhere Paul appears to warn believers to guard themselves against false letters. He writes about the Thessalonian church experiencing confusion on a doctrinal issue, possibly because someone forged a letter in his name (cf. 2 Thes 2:2–3). With not only the letters of the apostles but also false teaching circulating, the church had to be careful.

The New Testament sheds light not only on the usage of its books, but also their authoritative status. 2 Peter provides unique insight on this. “Look on our Lord's patience as the opportunity he is giving you to be saved, just as our dear friend Paul wrote to you, using the wisdom that God gave him. This is what he says in all his letters when he writes on the subject. There are some difficult things in his letters which ignorant and unstable people explain falsely, as they do with other passages of the Scriptures. So, they bring on their own destruction (2 Pt 3:15–16).” This passage indicates two very helpful things. One is that by the time 2 Peter was written, Paul had written several letters which were in circulation and accepted by the church. The other is the fact that the writer of 2 Peter refers to Paul's letters as Scripture. This would have been very significant in an era when the church's only Scriptures were the books of the

Hebrew Old Testament. Paul himself provides another example of this when he quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 together as Scripture in 1 Timothy 5:18. Very early in church history, then, the church considered at least some of Paul's letters and the gospel of Luke to be Scripture.

### Early Church Usage

These indications of written letters and accounts, their circulation, and the acceptance of some as authoritative find further support in extrabiblical church history. Dale Martin observes that oral tradition about Jesus began circulating before any writings did, but as Paul wrote letters, the churches to whom he sent them made copies and began to circulate them, and soon they came to be recognized as Scripture.<sup>16</sup> These, among other letters, naturally became part of the common practice of the church. Justin Martyr, who lived in the middle of the second century, writes that on Sundays, churches would gather for worship, read the apostles' writings, and be taught from them.<sup>17</sup> The church father Irenaeus wrote about the unity of the four gospels in 170, which indicates their early establishment as a biblical unit.<sup>18</sup> No single church authority forced these writings on the churches, but across the board the New Testament of the early church consisted of an irreducible minimum: the four gospels and Paul's thirteen letters.<sup>19</sup> This organic, widespread usage points beyond church acceptance to the Holy Spirit's preservation of his word and unification of his church in its early days.

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<sup>16</sup> Dale B. Martin, *New Testament History and Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Warren Carter, *Seven Events That Shaped the New Testament World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 164.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore C. Skeat, "Irenaeus and the Four-Gospel Canon," *Novum Testamentum* 34, no. 2 (1992): 199.

<sup>19</sup> Reid, "Canon of the Holy Scriptures."

### Marcion's Canon

Since Paul's letters and the four gospels form the most clearly accepted collection of canonical books, and many of the others which were accepted later have caused more debate, one might suppose that these formerly established books alone should be included in the canon. A significant figure in church history took a view similar to this, but he brought heresy along with it. Marcion, a church figure of the second century, created the first known canon list. However, he completely rejected the Old Testament and only accepted the gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's letters, excluding the pastoral epistles. Some suppose that this is because Luke and Paul appeared to be the least Jewish out of all the New Testament authors, and that Marcion went so far as to edit Old Testament quotations out of even those books which he accepted.<sup>20</sup> While proper canonization might not have been a great concern of the church prior to Marcion, his canon, along with other heretics who rejected the Pauline epistles entirely or called their own writings inspired, necessitated a response. The church had to form an official canon.<sup>21</sup>

### Early Canon Criteria

In order to combat the heresy of Marcion and others, the church needed criteria beyond church acceptance by which to recognize which books were canonical. The church was in a much better position to do this then than it would be today, simply because of the distance of time. Because the fathers of the early church had sat directly under the apostles or their disciples, they could clearly judge which books were consistent with apostolic teaching and which were not. Church leaders evaluated books based on whether they had a close connection to the

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<sup>20</sup> Martin, *New Testament History and Literature*, 21-22.

<sup>21</sup> Heinrich Schumacher, *A Handbook of Scripture Study* (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book CO., 1923), 86-87.

apostles, but also by their faithfulness to the truth of Christ's life and apostolic teaching. These books needed to accurately form the foundation for the Christian faith. The writings of the early church fathers demonstrate great unanimity on this subject,<sup>22</sup> further demonstrating the Holy Spirit's guidance of his church as a united whole.

### Final Canonization

At last, in A.D. 367, the Alexandrian bishop Athanasius produced his canon, the first to include all 27 books of the New Testament. While other lists included extracanonical books, these allowed that such books were not acceptable to the entire church.<sup>23</sup> Until this time, while the gospels, Acts, and writings of Paul, John, and Peter had enjoyed great acceptance in the church across Europe and Asia, some books like Hebrews and James had yet to be confirmed.<sup>24</sup> This does not mean that Athanasius singlehandedly granted these books the status of canonicity, but that they took longer for the church as a whole to accept them, perhaps because of their questionable authorship.<sup>25</sup> Just as the earlier accepted books were preserved by the Holy Spirit and used by the church all over the world, so these books of later acceptance were divinely preserved and entered into common church practice. Athanasius officially recognized them in a canon first, but he did not make them inspired.

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<sup>22</sup>Henry T. Sell, *Studies in Early Church History* (Willow Grove, PA: Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, 1998), study 7, Logos Bible Software.

<sup>23</sup>*Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Bible, Canon of The."

<sup>24</sup>Mackie, "Making of the Bible Part 3."

<sup>25</sup>Mounce, "What Criteria Were Used to Determine the Canon of Scripture?"

## Church Councils

Church councils have played a similar role of recognition when it comes to the New Testament canon. The first ecumenical church council in A.D. 325, the Council of Nicea, played a significant role in church history on doctrinal issues, but it did not touch on the canon.<sup>26</sup> The church council that is widely recognized for its role in canonization is the Council of Carthage, which took place in 397, some years after Athanasius created his list. This council did not create the canon of the New Testament, but simply recognized the books which the church already commonly used. Philip and David Schaff go as far as to say that the council was almost unnecessary because of the unity of the church on the subject.<sup>27</sup> While this council was a helpful affirmation of the canon at the time, it cannot by itself serve as the reason why Christians can have certainty about the inspired nature of the New Testament.

Many years later, the Council of Trent also made a statement about the canon, perhaps not for the universal church, but at least for Roman Catholics. The council declared that, “the entire books with all their parts, as they have been wont to be read in the Catholic Church and are contained in the old vulgate Latin edition, are to be held sacred and canonical.”<sup>28</sup> Such a statement may have been reaction from the Roman Catholic Church to the challenges and objections of Protestants during the Reformation. While this declaration is highly questionable due to its dependence on the Latin Vulgate and not the original texts, it does prove that more than a thousand years after the canon was formed, the church was still concerned about accurately recognizing the 27 books of the New Testament as inspired. Once more, such

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<sup>26</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Bible, Canon of.”

<sup>27</sup> Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 519, Logos Bible Software.

<sup>28</sup> *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, s.v. “Bible.”

affirmation is a helpful point of reference, but it does not prove the New Testament's canonicity. The New Testament canon was not determined by church leaders or councils at any point in time, but by the Holy Spirit who preserved and affirmed it through various means.

## Disputed Texts

### **Ehrman's Objections**

Bart Ehrman, a scholar of biblical criticism, challenges this traditional canon by asserting that some Scriptures, books revered by Christians as God's word, have been lost. He argues that extracanonical books, some of which the church rejected as heretical, were not left out for their failure to conform to already existing orthodox teaching and standards. Rather, those who rejected them did so almost arbitrarily, largely erasing them from history and claiming that their preferred books, the 27 which make up the New Testament, were the right ones, and these came to define orthodoxy. Ehrman encourages a rediscovery and appreciation for these "lost Scriptures," even while he admits that many of these were forgeries, largely rejected by the universal church.<sup>29</sup> Some of these, however, are less clearly extracanonical than others. Is Ehrman partially right? Is the New Testament canon missing books?

### **The Gospel of Thomas**

One popular book which frequently arises in this discussion is the *Gospel of Thomas*, a book attributed to Thomas the apostle, whom some believe was Jesus' twin brother. This book consists of 114 secret teachings, attributed to Jesus. It does not refer to the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection at any time, but instead emphasizes salvation through knowledge of hidden things. While the book contains some of Jesus' teachings found in other gospels, much of its

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<sup>29</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into the New Testament* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2-3.

contents reflect strong Gnosticism, a heresy which emphasizes hidden knowledge and the idea that people are fallen spirits trapped in evil, material bodies.<sup>30</sup> This false teaching combined with the absence of the true gospel alone gives a solid basis for its exclusion from the New Testament canon.

Even with these heretical teachings, did the *Gospel of Thomas* ever experience widespread church usage and acceptance as orthodox? Evidently, this book found its home primarily in the Syriac-speaking church, a church which is known in modern scholarship for the problems its collections of Scripture present.<sup>31</sup> This church drew its knowledge of the gospels mainly from Tatian's *Diatessaron*, which was not written until the late second century. Textual comparison indicates that the *Gospel of Thomas* was based on this work, and therefore is so far removed from original apostolic teaching that it cannot strongly contend for canonicity.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, church tradition as a whole has always recognized this book as a forgery in the name of the apostle Thomas.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, based on its heretical contents, limited usage, and dubious authorship, the *Gospel of Thomas* hardly deserves the status of the authoritative word of God.

### **The Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd Hermas**

While the *Gospel of Thomas* is clearly heretical and its claims of divine inspiration are easily refuted, other books present more difficulty. The *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd*

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<sup>30</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 19-20.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Craig A. Evans and Emmanuel Tov, *Exploring the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 229.

<sup>33</sup> Jens Schröter, *From Jesus to the New Testament: Early Christian Theology and the Origin of the New Testament Canon*, trans. Wayne Coppins (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 309.

*Hermas* merited inclusion among the books of the New Testament in Codex Sinaiticus, a fourth century Greek manuscript. These books do not have the glaring doctrinal flaws of the *Gospel of Thomas*. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, for example, is somewhat antagonistic toward Judaism, but it is not necessarily heretical.<sup>34</sup> However, examination of Codex Sinaiticus sheds some light on this issue. To begin with, this manuscript is divided by blank sheets of paper into three fixed parts. The first consists of the four gospels, the second of the Pauline epistles, Hebrews, and Philemon, and the third of Acts, the remaining epistles, and Revelation, with the *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd Hermas* at the very end.<sup>35</sup> The arrangement of the books appears to be from most fixed to least fixed in the canon, and it is very interesting that these two final books came after even Revelation, a book which took quite some time to be included.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, each book has a decorative mark at the end of it, and the marks on Revelation and the *Epistle of Barnabas* are more elaborate than those on any other book in the collection. Stanley Porter believes these elaborate marks imply that what follows them are textual irregularities, and that possibly the two final books in the Codex Sinaiticus did not possess the biblically authoritative status of the books before them.<sup>37</sup> At length, these books did not prevail in the New Testament canon. This does not mean that they do not contain truth or are completely useless, but they lack the divine authority to rule the universal church. Ehrman may be right that Christians should examine such books, but not as Scripture.

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<sup>34</sup> Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures*, 219.

<sup>35</sup> Stanley E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 131.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.



## Conclusion

Ultimately, how can Christians have certainty that the 27 books of the New Testament which they hold in their hands form an accurate canon of God's authoritative word, and that none should be added or removed? Certain criteria for a book's canonicity are helpful, but limited, and none of them are in and of themselves the ultimate proof of it. The true basis for such certainty comes from the Holy Spirit's preservation and implementation of the biblical canon in the early church. This work of the Holy Spirit is evidenced by the fact that the global church came to ultimately accept and use the same books as Scripture, long before any great church authority recognized them or declared they were the right ones. Likewise, although certain cults promoted extracanonical books, the church as a whole rejected these early on. Only God himself could orchestrate such unity among his people concerning his word and engineer a process which would produce a collection of books written by many authors, but in full agreement with itself. J. R. McCray writes that, "The formation of the canon must, therefore, be regarded as a process rather than an event, and a historical rather than a biblical matter. The coming of the Word of God to print is only slightly more capable of explication than the coming of the Word of God incarnate."<sup>38</sup> Although Christians cannot point to a single verse which easily explains the canon, by tracing the process of its formation in church history, they can discover an abundance of reasons to trust the Bible they have, and the church would be greatly edified if more Christians did.

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<sup>38</sup> *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. "Bible, Canon of."

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