

The Canon

What We Believe — Scripture

"Why are there only 66 books, or letters, in our Bibles?" That is a subject that involves understanding God's plan to deliver His will to the world's nations. It begins with the belief that God exists and communicates with us. The answer continues with the story of the inspired men recording the words God revealed to them and how their writings endure today. The collection of texts that make up the Bible is referred to as the **canon of scripture**. The English word canon comes from the Greek (κανών kanōn), meaning "rule" or "measuring stick." As a canon, The Bible is the standard of knowledge and behavior required of a servant of God.

The scriptures teach that every word recorded by the prophets and apostles was given to them by God through the Holy Spirit. Peter said, *"No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God"* (2 Peter 1:21). The Old Testament begins with Genesis, the words given through Moses telling about creation. It ends with the warnings and promises through the prophet Malachi. The New Testament canon begins with Matthew's proof that Jesus is the Christ and concludes with Christ's Revelation of His glorification and promise to return. Between Genesis and Revelation, the Bible conveys God's desires to people of various times, including histories, to show His dealings with His creation. The 66 inspired writings include the complete knowledge revealed to mankind. Paul said these words were, *"Inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:15-17). The Hebrew writer indicates that Jesus Christ completed the prophets to deliver God's final words on salvation. *"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world"* (Hebrews 1:1-2 ESV). Each text in the canon of scripture shows evidence of God's authority. Many writings are rejected from the canon because they do not meet God's authority criteria.

The canon of Old Testament scripture was completed within two hundred years of Israel's return to Jerusalem from the Babylon captivity. The nation understood the final writings by Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zachariah, and Malachi to be God-breathed words. They were, therefore, accepted with the writings of Moses, David, Solomon, historians, and prophets. Further proof of their origin is their acceptance by Jesus and the apostles. The many quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew texts, attests to their canonicity. Some texts not quoted from fit the order and design of the Old Testament message without any contradiction or addition to the Law and Prophets. Texts such as Ruth and Esther display God's providence in fulfilling the promises given to Abraham for a people, a nation, and a messiah.

For the New Testament, the primary criterion for recognizing books as part of the New Testament canon is whether they were inspired (2 Tim 3.16). Texts do not become inspired because they are canonical. They are part of the canon because God inspired them. Neither men nor the church produced the canon of the New Testament. It is the work of The Holy Spirit. Texts are in the New Testament canon of scripture because they satisfy three criteria. First, an apostle or an apostle's disciple wrote it. Second, the early church recognized it as inspired. And third, it contains and harmonizes with apostolic doctrine (it agrees with, confirms, or explains other scripture). Many texts are not accepted into the canon because they do not satisfy one or more criteria. Above all other

considerations, the New Testament canon is a collection of writings spoken by the Holy Spirit through the apostles of Christ.

Jesus commissioned His apostles to be His authoritative spokesmen, "*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8 ESV). Also, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to ensure they spoke and wrote the inerrant Word of God (John 16:7-13). The apostles laid hands on others, like Mark and Luke, so that they also might receive the inspired words and write them down for us. All texts of New Testament scripture are traced to one of the authoritative, inspired apostles. The early Christians essentially asked, "Is this the work of an apostle?" Or, "If not, was it produced under the supervision of and with the stamp of approval of an apostle?" For the 27 texts that make up our New Testaments, there is evidence that first and second century Christians accepted them as such.

Some would like to include other texts, like the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Phillip, and the Gospel of Mary. These three Gnostic Gospels contradict Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and each other. There are no contradictions among Holy Spirit-inspired writings. And, it is The Holy Spirit that directed and approved the canon of scripture, not people.

Do you accept the 27 texts of our New Testaments as Christ's final Word?