

How We Got Our New Testament

In all different churches, we read from the same 27 New Testament books. But how did we get that specific collection of texts? It is often claimed that it was a decision of the Church or of Constantine or of different Councils. But is that true? In this workshop, we are going to look at the historical data and at the historical process behind the New Testament.

Stefan Gustavsson is the director for Apologia – Centre for Christian Apologetics and makes his home in Stockholm. He was the founding General Secretary for the Swedish Evangelical Alliance. Stefan travels widely with apologetic teaching and training and is often involved in university evangelism and public debates. He is the author of several books on Christian apologetics and the Christian mind. Stefan is married to Ingrid and they have three grown children.

I. Introduction

A common perception: Originally a chaos of books and the need for a selection.

None of the first 7 ecumenical councils, 325 – 787, said anything about canon.

II. The Background

Israel was given a written covenant with God

Jesus established a new covenant and appointed apostles
= natural to expect new writings

The apostles knew their writings were unique: John 16:13, 2 Pet 3:15-16

III. The Uniqueness

The New Testament writings are unique: Early – Apostolic – Close to the historical Jesus.

Which other books are possible contenders for a place in the canon?

IV. The Sources

Marcion, 144 AD (a negative evidence)

The Muratorian fragment, 170 AD: 22 of 27 New Testament books

Origen, 185 – 254 AD: 27 books

Cyril of Jerusalem, 315 – 386 AD: 26 books (lacks Revelation)

Athanasius Easter Letter, 367 AD: 27 books

Synod of Laodicea 363 AD: 26 books (lacks Revelation)

Synod of Hippo 393 AD and Carthage 397 AD: 27 books

No Chaos of Books in the Church!

V. The Discussion

Full agreement 20 books. Discussions about 7 books during the 3rd and 4th century:

James, Judas, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John are small letters: Are they authentic?

Hebrews is An Anonymous letter: Who is the author?

Revelation used by the heretic Montanus: Misuse provoked questions.

Geography was a factor: The gospel spread faster than every individual text.

Hebrew controversial in the West, Revelation in the East.

Three main criteria in the discussion: Apostolic – Catholic – Orthodox

The attitude was to eliminate books, not to add books!

VI. Conclusion

Exclusive Canon: The church solidified the canonical boundaries in the fourth century.

Functional Canon: The core canonical texts were functioning authoritatively by the second century.

Ontological Canon: The texts were authoritative as soon the apostles finished writing them.

[From "The Question of Canon", by Michael J. Kruger]