

# EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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## Introduction to the New Testament

### 1. What is the New Testament?

- a. **The Biblical Text.** The Bible consists of 66 books, divided into two sections: the Old Testament (39 books) and the New Testament (27 books). These inspired books were written over the course of 1500 years on three different continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe) by at least 35 human authors using three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). Thus, the New Testament represents 25% of the Bible.
- b. **Why Old and New Testaments?** The reason these two biblical divisions are called “testaments” isn’t primarily due to chronology but theology. The English word “testament” comes from the Hebrew word “*berith*,” the Greek word “*diathēkē*,” and the Latin word “*testamentum*,” where each refer to a “covenant,” or an agreement made between two parties. Therefore, even though the Old Testament is chronologically older than the New Testament, the reason for these two sections is because one is focused on the old covenant that God made with Israel based on the law (i.e., Mosaic Covenant, Ex 19:5-6; 24:8), and the other is focused on the New Covenant that God made with Israel and the nations based on grace (Jer. 31:31), which was fulfilled by the person and work of Jesus in the first century and advanced through the gospel ministries of the church until he returns.
- c. **Inspiration.** The reason we exalt the Bible over every other book comes down to one word: inspiration. Unlike any other piece of literature in history, the Bible is the only book that has been inspired by God, which means that God is the ultimate author. The theological doctrine of inspiration indicates that although God used human authors to write down the words of Scripture, everything written down was exactly what he wanted to be written. Therefore, Scripture is inerrant, infallible, and fully authoritative, which is why we believe in the reformational doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone). Luther described Scripture as the “*norma normans non normata*” (“norm of norms that can’t be normed”), meaning that Scripture is the standard that has no standards, and cannot be changed due to some other standard. However, while God is the ultimate author of Scripture, he used the languages, personalities, cultural settings, and historical situations of the human authors to deliver his message, which is why the Bible is so diverse in language, style, and genre. By way of analogy, just as Jesus’s birth was the result of the Holy Spirit producing a child through a human mother, Scripture is the result of the Holy Spirit producing God’s Word through human writers.
  - **Hebrews 1:1-2** – “*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.*”

- **2 Peter 1:21** – “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”
- **2 Timothy 3:16-17** – “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”
- **1 Cor. 13:37** – “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.”

d. **Message:** The overall message of the New Testament is to confirm the person and work of Christ, outline his teachings and commands, draw sinners to faith in Jesus, guide and encourage the church, and point believers toward the assurance of his second coming.

## 2. What is Included in the New Testament?

a. **New Testament Canon:** The word “canon” originates from a Greek word meaning “straight staff” or “measuring rod,” and it refers to a guide, model, or standard. Therefore, the biblical canon is the standard of what is acceptable, what is considered divine and authoritative.

Gospels	History	Pauline Epistles	General Epistles	Prophecy
Matthew Mark Luke John	Acts	Romans 1-2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1-2 Thessalonians 1-2 Timothy Titus Philemon	1-2 Peter James Hebrews? Jude 1-3 John	Revelation

b. **Why 27 Books?** The most fundamental answer is, as Geisler and Nix point out, “Christ is the key to the inspiration and canonization of the Scriptures. It was He who confirmed the inspiration of the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament, and it was He who promised that the Holy Spirit would direct the apostles into all truth” (Geisler, 207). God is the One who inspired the New Testament to be written, and he oversaw the transmission and canonicity of the specific texts. Therefore, the 27 books included in the New Testament canon were not determined by the Church, but discovered by the Church. While humans were used in this process, it was ultimately God’s sovereign hand that supervised the process of including these specific books (and only these books) into the category of Christian Scripture.

- **Debate:** With other books claiming to be Scripture (i.e., Pseudepigrapha, e.g., Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, Paul's Epistle to the Laodiceans, etc.) , how do we know which books were divinely inspired and authoritative?
- **Origin:** There is strong evidence in the New Testament that the writers themselves knew that what they and others were writing was divinely inspired material, and should be collected and designated as Scripture. Therefore, the church didn't merely discover and decide on these texts in later centuries, but these texts were already understood as divinely inspired and authoritative as they were being written.
  - **1 Timothy 5:18** – *"For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" (The first reference is from Deut. 25:4; the second reference is from Luke 10:7. It's significant that while Paul was writing 1 Timothy in the mid-first century, he already knew of Luke's Gospel and included it in the category of "Scripture," the same as the inspired Hebrew Scriptures. Therefore, Paul understood Luke to be inspired and canonical.*
  - **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 acknowledges Paul's writings as "Scripture.")*
- **Early Recognition:** Following the apostolic era, the earliest of the church fathers in the late first century and early second century were already referring to the books in our New Testament as "Scripture."
  - **1 Clement (AD 96):** Clement of Rome cited books from the Old Testament and New Testament (canonical Gospels, Acts, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Titus, Hebrews, 1 Peter, and James) as equals in authority, thus declaring the New Testament books to be Scripture.
  - **Polycarp (AD 69-155):** It's believed that Polycarp was a personal disciple of John, learning at his feet from a young age. However, when Polycarp wrote to the Philippian church, he quoted from Matthew, Luke, Acts, Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, and 1 John. It's significant that Polycarp said, *"For I am convinced that you are all well trained in the sacred scriptures....Only as it is said in these scriptures, 'be angry but do not sin,' and 'do not let the sun set on your anger'" (Polycarp, Phil. 12:1; cited in Köstenberger, 6-7). He understood Ephesians as Scripture, along with the rest of Paul's letters.*
  - **Papias (AD 60-130):** Papias was also a personal disciple of John, and he wrote five books entitled, *"Expositions of the Lord's Sayings."* Scholars have noted that Papias approved of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and Revelation as Scripture.

- **Serapion** (d. 211): In a negative example, Serapion of Antioch denied the pseudepigraphal work, "The Gospel of Peter," noting, "For our part, brethren, we receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ, but the writings which falsely bear their names we reject, as men of experience, knowing that such were not handed down to us" (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 5.22.1.).
- **Criteria of Acceptance:** There are several important factors that determine if a book should be accepted as Scripture (i.e. canonical).
  - **Apostolicity:** Was the work written in close association with an apostle? Books written by apostles are known as "direct writings" (e.g., Romans, 1 Peter, 1 John, etc.). Books written by those closely associated with the apostles and written under their supervision are known as "indirect writings" (e.g., Mark associated with Peter; Luke associated with Paul; James and Jude were Jesus' brothers, etc.). Ridderbos notes, "While Christ himself fully and completely accomplished redemption, he appointed apostles to be those authoritative agents by which the message of redemption would be transmitted, preserved, and guarded" (cited in Kruger, 558).
  - **Orthodoxy:** Was the work in agreement with the teachings of other Scripture? In other words, does the content find unity and harmony with the rest of the Bible (i.e., the rule of faith)?
  - **Reception:** Was the work received and accepted by the early churches? Did early believers filled with the Holy Spirit discern that these books were from God?
  - **Antiquity:** Was the work produced in the apostolic era? If a book wasn't written during the mid-to-late first century, it couldn't be accepted. This eliminated many of the pseudepigraphal works of the second and third centuries. For example, in the second century, the *Shepherd of Hermas* was rejected because it was written "very recently, in our own times" (Ignatius, *Rom.* 4.4; 1). Such a standard means that the canon was closed after John's death at the end of the first century.
- **Disputed Books:** Hebrews (no author); James (no mention of Christ); 2-3 John, Jude (too short); Revelation (too strange). However, these books were finally accepted into the canon.
- **Final Recognition:** In AD 367, the *Thirty-Ninth Paschal Letter* of Athanasius contained an exact list of the twenty-seven New Testament books we have today. This was the list of books accepted by the churches in the eastern part of the Mediterranean world. These 27 books were also confirmed by the western churches thirty years later at the Council of Carthage (AD 397).