

THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Did the Christian church accept and embrace doctrinal diversity in its earliest years? Was the New Testament the creation of church leaders in the fourth century? Did those leaders use their authority to impose the New Testament on the early Christians?

The recognition that the writings of the apostles were special can be found in the earliest Christian literature. While the contents of the New Testament are not specifically stated, the underlying reasons that eventually led to the formation of the New Testament are evident.

- In the mid-60s of the first century, the apostle Peter mentions Paul. “He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16). Some scholars believe that an anonymous individual wrote 2 Peter in the early 2nd century. Even if that were true, it would still be evidence that at an early date a collection of Paul’s letters were circulating and considered as authoritative as the “other Scriptures” or the Old Testament.
- Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, who was martyred for the faith around A.D. 115, stressed the key roles of bishops, but he did not equate his authority as equal to the apostles. “They were apostles, I am a convict; they were free, I am even until now a slave” (*Letter to the Romans* 4.3). By the beginning of the 2nd century the writings of the apostles were understood to be in a class by themselves.

Around A.D. 140, a man named Marcion produced a list of writings that he considered authoritative. He rejected the Old Testament and anything Jewish; therefore, he listed only ten of Paul’s letters and an edited version of the Gospel of Luke. In response to Marcion, leaders in the church such as Justin Martyr (died A.D. 165) and Irenaeus (~A.D. 130-200) began to be more specific about which writings were accepted by the church as authoritative. Later Christians continued the process as the chart below demonstrates.

A = accepted as authoritative D = debated by Christians R = respected but not authoritative H = heretical

	<i>Muratorian Fragment</i> Late 2 nd century Rome	<i>Tertullian</i> Died ~220 Carthage	<i>Origen</i> Died 254 Alexandria	<i>Eusebius</i> Died 339 Caesarea	<i>Athanasius’ Festal Letter of 367</i> Alexandria
Four Gospels	A	A	A	A	A
Acts	A	A	A	A	A
Thirteen Pauline Epistles	A	A	A	A	A
Hebrews		D	D	A	A
James			D	D	A
1 Peter		A	A	A	A
2 Peter			D	D	A

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1 John	A	A	A	A	A
2 John	A		D	D	A
3 John			D	D	A
Jude	A	A	D	D	A
Revelation	A	A	A	A	A
Wisdom of Solomon	A				
Shepherd of Hermas	R	D	D	R	R
Apocalypse of Peter	D			R	
The Didache			D	R	R
Letter to Barnabas			D	R	
Acts of Paul			D	R	
Gospel According to Hebrews			R	R	
“Paul’s” letters to the Laodiceans & Alexandrines	H				
Writings by Arsinous, Valentinus, Miltiades, & Montanus	H				
Psalms for Marcion	H				
Writings by Basilides	H		H		
Gospel According to the Egyptians			H		
Gospel of the Twelve			H		
Gospel of Peter				H	
Gospel of Matthias			H		

Even this brief survey demonstrates that no church council created the New Testament. The process of collecting apostolic writings began early in the life of the church and involved Christians from across the Roman Empire. New Testament scholar, Bruce M. Metzger, concludes, “What is really remarkable . . . is that, though the fringes of the New Testament canon remained unsettled for centuries, a high degree of unanimity concerning the greater part of the New Testament was attained within the first two centuries among the very diverse and scattered congregations not only throughout the Mediterranean world but also over an area extending from Britain to Mesopotamia.” The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 254.