

**The Criteria Used for Developing the New Testament Canon  
in the First Four Centuries of the Christian Church**

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## **Introduction**

In this modern age, people take for granted that the New Testament they use represents authentic words and teachings of Jesus Christ and His Apostles. They don't question the process by which these books were chosen to form the Bible. However there was a time when the New Testament as a collection of writings did not exist. The development of the New Testament canon came about over a long process in the early centuries of the Christian Church. It was not produced at a specific point in time, nor was it decided on by one specific person or council. The criteria for including a particular writing in the New Testament canon included such items as apostolic authenticity, orthodoxy, antiquity, and usage by earlier Church Fathers. There seems to be two identifiable periods in which different criteria were used for selecting authoritative writings. In the first two centuries, 'apostolic authority' was the important factor in deciding to keep or reject a particular writing. In the third and fourth centuries, the list of canonical books was mostly defined and the primary criterion used to reach final decisions was whether it was used by orthodox church theologians in earlier centuries.

In dealing with the topic of what criteria were used to choose the writings to be included in the New Testament canon, it is important to understand why a New Testament canon was seen as something necessary to compile. In the earliest days of the church there was a strong oral tradition left by the Apostles with very little perceived need for an authoritative group of recognized Christian writings. When heresies threatened church doctrine and teaching, a more formal response was needed to define which documents were recognized as authoritative.

## **The First Two Centuries**

In the early days after the Apostles of Christ, there were only scattered Christian writings that were seen as authoritative Christian literature. The words of Jesus Christ as heard and announced by the Apostles and other eyewitnesses were what was important to these early

Christians. These words had been passed on verbally from the Apostles and subsequently to other men appointed by them to announce this Christian witness and tradition. Some churches had been sent letters by an Apostle and these churches had probably shared them with other local congregations. Even as Paul himself mentions in Colossians 4:16, “Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.”<sup>1</sup> “But in many cases Christians possessing a letter from Paul probably did not know that any others existed elsewhere. ... It must have been at a later stage that the idea of making a collection of Paul’s letters caught on.”<sup>2</sup>

During this early period there were probably early accounts of the life of Christ also circulating among local regions and churches. Clement of Rome, writing about 90 CE, makes reference to quotes from Matthew (although this could have been from oral tradition).<sup>3</sup> The Epistle of Barnabas, at the end of the first century, undoubtedly quotes Matthew 22:14 (since this saying is found nowhere else) when he says, “as it is written, ‘Many are called, but few are chosen.’”<sup>4</sup> Reference to these early Christian documents are made by others, such as the Gnostic Basilides (c.130) and Valentinus (c.140). Basilides quotes from Paul’s first letter to I Corinthians<sup>5</sup> and the Gospel of John<sup>6</sup>. His quotes are only extant in Hippolytus’ refutation against his heresies. Valentinus wrote ‘The Gospel of Truth’ and the ‘Epistle to Rheginus on Resurrection’ in which he

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 4:16, The New King James Version, Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> O. Jessie Luce, ed, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible: Understanding the New Testament. Section 3, How the New Testament Came into Being, by C.F.D. Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 114.

<sup>3</sup> Clement of Rome, First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1. The Ages Digital Library Collections [CD-ROM] (Albany: Ages Software, 1997) Chapter 13, P. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Barnabas, Letter of Barnabas, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1. The Ages Digital Library Collections [CD-ROM] (Albany: Ages Software, 1997) Chapter 4, P. 257.

<sup>5</sup> Hippolytus, Refutation of All Heresies, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 5, July 1975. The Ages Digital Library Collections [CD-ROM] (Albany: Ages Software, 1997) Book 7, Chapter 14, P. 220.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 7, Chapter 15, P. 222.

cites many passages from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the letters of Paul, along with Hebrews and Revelation.<sup>7</sup>

The church in the first generations after Christ seemed content with this oral tradition and having local letters from the early Apostles, with no official statement about what were authoritative Christian writings. There seemed to be no need for authoritative and universally accepted Christian writings at an age that was so close to when Christ and his Apostles lived and taught. In uplifting the power of the spoken testimony of the apostles and their associates, Papias, an early second century church father says,

“If, then, any one who had attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings, — what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord’s disciples: . . . For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice.”<sup>8</sup>

However, during the early second century there arose internal attacks on the church in the form of different teachings and heresies. Some of the early deviations from the truths taught by the Church were from people like Montanus and Valentinus. The most notable attack concerning the topic at hand were the claims of Marcion in about 140 CE. Marcion was an early Christian Gnostic who believed that the God of the Old Testament was different than the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ spoken of in the New Testament. Therefore, he stated that the gospel as passed on through the church had been corrupted and that the true gospel was one that rejected the Old Testament and any relation to it. In order to defend and spread this teaching, he gathered together a collection of writings which he claimed were the only official and inspired scriptures that contained the unadulterated truths conveyed by Jesus Christ. This collection consisted of most of the Gospel of Luke and all the Epistles of Paul (with some modifications removing references to the Old Testament). As stated by von Campenhausen regarding Marcion, “Till then no one had advanced,

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<sup>7</sup> F.F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988) 146-147.

<sup>8</sup> Papias, Fragments of Papias, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1. The Ages Digital Library Collections [CD-ROM] (Albany: Ages Software, 1997) P. 279.

as he now did, the claim to present the *only* normative and authentic documents of Christianity, in order to use them for the purpose of a total transformation and renewal of the doctrine and preaching of the Church.”<sup>9</sup>

Marcion’s canon raised some questions that had to be answered such as, ‘What was sound, godly, and apostolic teaching? Once defined, how could these teachings be defended?’ “The problem was the new one, which of the contending traditions in fact rightly reflected Jesus and his teaching, where the undistorted truth was to be found, and by what criteria it was to be determined.”<sup>10</sup> The church had to show that the teachings of Marcion were not what was taught by Christ or the Apostles from the beginning of the church. In order to address Marcion’s false claims, it became important to the early Christian Fathers to define what was the authority on Christian thought, doctrine, and teaching.

“In a Church where there was no heresy and no disputing and no oppression from outside, there would be no need even to draw up a definitive list. But in fact the Church did have to face just such troubles as these. The people who claimed to be Christians but who held ideas which the Christian world as a whole recognized as out of tune with the dominant notes of the tradition had to be met and replied to; and how could that be done successfully if the Church as a whole had no definition of its own authoritative writings? It was precisely because of the heretical contents of the writings to which these men appealed... that the Church had to reach a decision about which to exclude and which to recognize. ... for the sake of defending the truth, they had to be officially and formally defined.”<sup>11</sup>

Since the Christian churches were founded upon the original Apostles, it seemed obvious that the writings that came from them were the ones that would have accurately recorded the teachings of Jesus and the happenings of the early church. “A most important problem for the Church was to determine what really constituted a true gospel and a genuine apostolic writing. In order to prevent the exploitation of secret traditions, which were practically uncontrollable, the

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<sup>9</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, The Formation of the Christian Bible, Translated by J.A. Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 162.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>11</sup> O. Jessie Luce, 120.

Church had to be careful to accept nothing which did not bear the stamp of apostolic guarantee.”<sup>12</sup>

“In view of the growing flood of gospels of a Gnostic character, and in face of the Marcionite claim to be the sole possessors of the few genuine and original documents, the catholic churches in their turn could not evade the necessity of laying down which texts were to be acknowledged as authentic and normative – ‘documents of the Lord’ – and which not.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the early Christian writers that combated Marcion’s heresy (and thus addressed his claim to have the only authoritative scriptures) was Irenaeus (fl. c.175-c.195). In addressing Marcion (and other heretical teachers), Irenaeus appealed to authoritative Christian writings that seem to be well known as apostolic.<sup>14</sup> Although there was still no formal recognition of what was ‘scripture’ and what was not by this early time, there were writings that had been collected together and were generally viewed as authoritative.<sup>15, 16</sup> Thus Irenaeus helped to further define and formulate what the authoritative writings were and helped to prove their authority based upon apostolic witness. He quotes from these writings and defends them as the standard by which all Christian doctrine and practice should be derived.

“Irenaeus is no longer content to safeguard and expound the Old Testament alone; as the first catholic theologian he begins to appeal to the New Testament documents, that is, he explicitly names them, defends their authenticity, and declares them to be normative. ...according to Irenaeus, Scripture and tradition, as regards their doctrinal content, are in entire agreement, and the purpose of Scripture is to confirm the teaching of the Church against all doubts.”<sup>17</sup>

So, as Marcion tried to create an artificial list of historically inspired Christian writings, Irenaeus appeals to all the Christian writings that were written by the Apostles as the criteria for honoring a book as inspired and for using it to form Christian teaching and doctrine. He also argues

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1887; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 76.

<sup>13</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, 170.

<sup>14</sup> F.F. Bruce, The Canon of Scripture (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988) 173.

<sup>15</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, 172.

<sup>16</sup> O. Jessie Lace, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, 182.

that these documents, which were already esteemed and honored by the Christian churches, were the originals that have existed from the time of the Apostles.

Irenaeus compiled a list of books that he deemed as authoritative and thus for the first time created a preliminary Christian canon of Scripture. Even though no church council or group of leaders had made a statement about which books should be considered authoritative, the list by Irenaeus (and his contemporaries like Tertullian<sup>18</sup> and Hippolytus<sup>19</sup>) helped to create an established list of Christian documents for the Church in the third century, with only minor details to be worked out. “By the close of the second century, . . . , we can see the outline of what may be described as the nucleus of the New Testament. Although the fringes of the emerging canon remained unsettled for generations, a high degree of unanimity concerning the greater part of the New Testament was attained. . . .”<sup>20</sup>

The Muratorian Canon is another example showing that the criteria used for establishing the authority of a book in the second century CE was apostolic authenticity. This is a document dated about 170 CE that was found by (and named after) Muratori in the mid-eighteenth century. In mentioning apostolicity as a test for inclusion in the New Testament, Metzger says, “When the writer of the Muratorian Fragment declares against the admission of the *Shepherd* of Hermas into the canon, he does so on the ground that it is too recent, and that it cannot find a place ‘among the prophets, whose number is complete, or among the apostles’. . . . the apostolic origin, real or putative, of a book provided a presumption of authority, . . .”<sup>21</sup>

It is important to understand that for documents to have ‘apostolic authority’, it was not necessary for an original Apostle to write them. What was important was not ‘apostolic authorship’ but rather ‘apostolic authority’, thereby accurately conveying the lives and teachings of Christ and the early Apostles. “It is certainly necessary that the normative writings should be ancient and

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<sup>18</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, 275-276.

<sup>19</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, 271.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, 75.

authentic, in order to demonstrate what the apostolic teaching originally was, but it is not essential that these Scriptures should without exception derive solely from the apostles. It is enough if they reproduce the apostolic proclamation conscientiously and without misrepresentation.”<sup>22</sup>

Certain books, such as the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke, do not claim to have been written by an Apostle. However, it was generally believed and accepted that Mark “‘having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things done or said by Christ. . . . For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.’ These things are related by Papias concerning Mark.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Luke was a traveling companion to the Apostle Paul and was committed to writing a historically accurate account of the life of Christ and of the early church. Showing the close connection that Luke had with Paul, Irenaeus writes:

“But that this Luke was inseparable from Paul, and his fellow-laborer in the Gospel, he himself clearly evinces, not as a matter of boasting, but as bound to do so by the truth itself. . . . Paul has himself declared also in the Epistles, saying: “Demas hath forsaken me, . . . and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me.” From this he shows that he was always attached to and inseparable from him. And again he says, in the Epistle to the Colossians: “Luke, the beloved physician, greets you.” But surely if Luke, who always preached in company with Paul, and is called by him “the beloved,” and with him performed the work of an evangelist, and was entrusted to hand down to us a Gospel, learned nothing different from him (Paul), as has been pointed out from his words, . . .”<sup>24</sup>

Implicit within the understanding of ‘apostolic authority’ includes the understanding that the writing contains orthodox teaching and has been around from antiquity (the time of the Apostles). Obviously if a writing had apostolic authority, then it must be believed to be orthodox with the current beliefs and teachings of the church, and it also must have existed from the earliest days of the church, when the apostles were still alive and writing. If a document was not orthodox

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<sup>21</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, 253.

<sup>22</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, 205.

<sup>23</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, Philip Schaff, ed. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. 1. The Ages Digital Library Collections [CD-ROM] (Albany: Ages Software, 1997) Book 3, Chapter 39, P. 252.

according to the standards of Church doctrine in that day, then it would not have been a document that could claim apostolic authority. “In other words, they had recourse to the criterion of orthodoxy. By ‘orthodoxy’ they meant the apostolic faith – the faith set forth in the undoubted apostolic writings and maintained in the churches which had been founded by apostles. This appeal to the testimony of the churches of apostolic foundation was developed specially by Irenaeus.”<sup>25</sup> And if it was not a document that was known to exist since the earliest days of the church, then it could not claim apostolic authority. “If a writing was the work of an apostle or of someone closely associated with an apostle, it must belong to the apostolic age. Writings of later date, whatever their merit, could not be included among the apostolic or canonical books.”<sup>26</sup>

### **The Third and Fourth Centuries**

Whereas in the first two centuries the dominant criterion used to verify a genuine Christian writing was apostolic authority, this no longer would be the case in the third and fourth centuries. Due to the writings of early church theologians such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus, by the early part of the third century, the uncertainties and questions regarding which writings composed the Christian scriptures no longer seemed to be an issue to be debated or questioned. By the time of Origen in the early third century, it seems that the writings quoted by these earlier churchmen as authoritative were now generally accepted as the books that composed the New Testament scriptures. As von Campenhausen says,

“The tentative uncertainties of the earlier period, when it became necessary for the first time to form and consolidate the new Canon, have, by the time we come of Origen, been in principle overcome and belong to the past. The sacred and divine Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are for him a datum which God has bestowed on the Church. The faith of Christians lives by the Scripture and cleaves to it alone.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies), Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1. The Ages Digital Library Collections [CD-ROM] (Albany: Ages Software) 1997. Book III, Chapter 14, P. 869.

<sup>25</sup> F.F. Bruce, 260.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 259-260.

<sup>27</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, 307-308.

The criteria used for recognizing a book as authoritative would no longer be primarily apostolic authority. It would now be whether a book was quoted by earlier churchmen as authoritative. Von Campenhausen says concerning Origen's view of authoritative scriptures that, "Origen is unacquainted with any 'principle of apostolicity' as a means of arriving at a correct selection. It is clear that for him the factor of supreme importance was universal acceptance by the Church, and to this he frequently refers."<sup>28</sup>

This principle is seen more clearly by the mid fourth century with writers such as Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, and Augustine of Hippo. By this time, even though there was some debate regarding whether certain books should be included in the authoritative list of Scriptures, these debates were mainly resolved by how the books were treated by earlier Church Fathers. If the books were treated as having apostolic authority by earlier writers, then those in this later period would consider them to have this authority. Another point that was discussed at this time was whether the book under question was orthodox in terms of early and present church doctrine, but this was overshadowed by whether earlier church writers, who were considered orthodox, used a certain book as authoritative.

Notice how the early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, writing in the early part of the fourth century, no longer uses the criteria of apostolic authority, but rather whether a book was quoted by early orthodox church fathers.

"ONE epistle of Peter, that called the first, is acknowledged as genuine. And this the ancient elders used freely in their own writings as an undisputed work. But we have learned that his extant second Epistle does not belong to the canon; yet, as it has appeared profitable to many, it has been used with the other Scriptures. The so-called Acts of Peter, however, and the Gospel which bears his name, and the Preaching and the Apocalypse, as they are called, we know have not been universally accepted, because no ecclesiastical writer, ancient or modern, has made use of testimonies drawn from them. But in the course of my history I shall be careful to show, in addition to the official succession, what ecclesiastical writers have from time to time made use of any of the disputed works, and what they have said in regard to the canonical and accepted writings, as well as in regard to those which are

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<sup>28</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, 320-321.

not of this class. Such are the writings that bear the name of Peter, only one of which I know to be genuine and acknowledged by the ancient elders.

Paul's fourteen epistles are well known and undisputed. It is not indeed right to overlook the fact that some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it is disputed by the church of Rome, on the ground that it was not written by Paul. But what has been said concerning this epistle by those who lived before our time I shall quote in the proper place. In regard to the so-called Acts of Paul, I have not found them among the undisputed writings."<sup>29</sup>

Both Jerome and Augustine, who 'exerted a decisive influence in settling the Canon for the Latin church'<sup>30</sup> felt that the list of books they had received as authoritative should not be questioned and debated, but should be received and defended.<sup>31</sup> Even though Jerome had his own opinions about whether certain books should be included in the New Testament canon or not, he felt that the canon had already been established and that no person, however eminent, could add or take away from it based on personal preferences.<sup>32</sup> Jerome, as a major constituent in establishing the canon of the Western Church, was greatly influenced by the fact that certain books had always been and were currently recognized by the Eastern Church as authoritative. This is especially seen in F.F. Bruce's quote of Jerome concerning his comments on the authority of the book of Hebrews:

"This must be said to our people, that the epistle which is entitled 'To the Hebrews' is accepted as the apostle Paul's not only by the churches of the east but by all church writers in the Greek language of earlier times, although many judge it to be by Barnabas or by Clement. It is of no great moment who the author is, since it is the work of a churchman and receives recognition day by day in the churches' public reading. If the custom of the Latins does not receive it among the canonical scriptures, neither, by the same liberty, do the churches of the Greeks accept John's Apocalypse. Yet we accept them both, not following the custom of the present time but the precedent of early writers, who generally make free use of testimonies from both works. And this they do, ... treating them as canonical ecclesiastical works."<sup>33</sup>

Augustine made similar statements about receiving the book of Hebrews based on its reception and use by the Eastern Church. "I am moved rather by the prestige of the eastern

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<sup>29</sup> Eusebius, *Church History*, Philip Schaff, ed. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. 1. The Ages Digital Library Collections [CD-ROM] (Albany: Ages Software, 1997) Book III, chapter 3, P. 212.

<sup>30</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume II, Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Printing Company, 1910) 524.

<sup>31</sup> F.F. Bruce, 229.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-227.

churches’, said Augustine, ‘to include this epistle too among the canonical writings’; but he had reservation about its authorship. Like his older contemporary Jerome, he distinguished between canonicity and apostolic authorship.’<sup>34</sup>

At a time before official statements were made regarding which books the universal Church as a whole received as the New Testament canon, Augustine made statements regarding what criteria a church should use to determine whether to recognize a document as authoritative. “... among the canonical Scriptures he will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive. Among those, again, which are not received by all, he will prefer such as have the sanction of the greater number and those of greater authority.”<sup>35</sup> This again shows that by this later date it was more a question of general church usage and acceptance that ratified a document. The question of apostolic authority had been decided upon by earlier generations of Christian churchmen.

Although Irenaeus had listed which books he felt were authoritative for the Christian Church, he didn’t make a ‘closed list’ containing definitive statements about other books that should not be allowed to have authority in the church.<sup>36</sup> “The practice of drawing up closed lists of authoritative NT scriptures appears to have started with Eusebius, and within a short time such lists began to appear everywhere in both the East and the West. ... At first these lists were products of individuals. Subsequently (especially in the fifth century) they began to grow out of council decisions.”<sup>37</sup> Then when Jerome produced the Latin Vulgate translation of the entire Bible it was generally accepted by the Western Church as authoritative. This virtually fixed the canon in the Western Church.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> F.F. Bruce, 258.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, Philip Schaff, ed. The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers First Series, vol. 2. The Ages Digital Library Collections [CD-ROM] (Albany: Ages Software, 1997) Book 2, Chapter 8, P. 1124.

<sup>36</sup> F.F. Bruce, 173.

<sup>37</sup> Lee M. McDonald, The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon, rev. and enl. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995) 251.

<sup>38</sup> F.F. Bruce, 225.

By the end of the fourth century the New Testament canon was fixed in the form that it would continue to keep until the present day. The councils of Hippo and Carthage at the end of the fourth century confirmed that these books “should be read as divine Scriptures to the exclusion of all others in the churches.”<sup>39</sup>

“The first express definition of the New Testament canon, in the form in which it has since been universally retained, comes from two African synods, held in 393 at Hippo, and 397 at Carthage, in the presence of Augustin, who exerted a commanding influence on all the theological questions of his age. By that time, at least, the whole church must have already become nearly unanimous as to the number of the canonical books; so that there seemed to be no need even of the sanction of a general council.”<sup>40</sup>

In defining which books composed the New Testament canon, these councils did “not impose any innovation on the churches; they simply endorsed what had become the general consensus of the churches of the west and of the greater part of the east.”<sup>41</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Because the New Testament canon was developed over a long period of time in the beginning centuries of the church and a great number of people influenced this final outcome, defining the criteria used for including books in the canon is a complicated process. An overview of the major Christian writers in these centuries seems to indicate that there were two periods in which different criteria were used. In the first two centuries, what was important was apostolic authority, recognizing those writings which accurately conveyed the original apostolic message. In the third and fourth centuries, the list of canonical books was already mostly defined and the primary criterion used to reach final decisions was whether the writing had been used as authoritative and apostolic by godly, orthodox men in earlier centuries, thus defining for us the New Testament books that we have and use today.

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<sup>39</sup> Philip Schaff, 524.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 519.

<sup>41</sup> F.F. Bruce, 97.

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