

SESSION 4

How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen

Get This: God created the New Testament canon by inspiring the written words of Christ-commissioned eyewitnesses and their close associates.

“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.”—2 Peter 3:15–16

Session 4 Outline



Use this session outline to follow along with the video and take notes.

1. Who created the canon of the New Testament?
 - a. The canon wasn't created by any human being.
 - b. Early Christians recognized a canon that God had already created.

2. First-century Christians recognized the writings of Christ-commissioned apostles and their close associates as authoritative.
 - a. Paul: Galatians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 14:37–38
 - b. Peter: 2 Peter 3:15–16
 - c. Gospel writers: Luke 1:1–2; John 21:24
 - d. The Muratorian Fragment: “The Shepherd” was rejected as authoritative because it was written long after the time of the apostles.

3. Did all Christians recognize the same books?
 - a. 20 books of the New Testament were always recognized; 7 books questioned.
 - b. “Gospel of Peter” was rejected because it was not written by Peter.

4. Some New Testament books were questioned, but later it became clear that they could be traced to Christ-commissioned eyewitnesses and their close associates.
 - a. Hebrews (See Hebrews 13:23)
 - b. James and Jude were half-brothers of Jesus who saw the resurrected Christ.
 - c. 1 and 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John were written by eyewitnesses of Jesus.

Key Terms

Apostle—From Greek *apostolos*, “sent out,” “commissioned”; a witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:22) and recipient of his teachings (Ephesians 3:5), commissioned to safeguard the gospel and to apply the teachings of Jesus in the churches. Occasionally applied more broadly to individuals sent on a mission (Acts 14:4, 14).

Athanasius (c. 296–373)—A bishop in Alexandria who championed the doctrine of the Trinity against the heretic Arius. He wrote an Easter letter in the year AD 367 which listed the same 27 books that appear in the New Testament today.

Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200)—As a pastor seeking to care for his people, Irenaeus came into sharp dispute with certain Gnostics who denied Christ’s humanity. Around AD 180, Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* in which he mentioned all four Gospels in order along with their origins.

Lost Gospels—The term “lost Gospels” usually refers to ancient writings that were excluded from the New Testament, even though they included supposed recollections of events and teachings from the life of Jesus. Complete manuscripts of a few of these lost Gospels have survived. Others survive only in tiny fragments of papyrus or in brief quotations found in the writings of early Christian scholars. Several lost Gospels were discovered anew in the past 100 years. Copies of some texts—such as *Gospel of Philip*, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospel of Truth*, and *Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians*—were unearthed in 1945 in Egypt, near a village known as Nag Hammadi. If a *Gospel* is defined as an ancient retelling of the events or teachings from Jesus’ life, there are fewer than 30 known Gospels. Unlike the New Testament Gospels, many lost Gospels record only isolated teachings or fragmentary incidents from the life of Jesus.

Muratorian Fragment—First known listing of Christian writings that were received as authoritative and be publicly read in the churches; so called because it’s recorded on a fragment discovered by a man named Ludovico Muratori around 1740. No one knows who recorded this list; the list seems to have been written in the vicinity of Rome in the second half of the second

century and may have originated in a gathering of church leaders. The list includes all the books that appear in the New Testament today except Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John.

Before the Gathering

- Prayerfully seek God’s guidance for this gathering.
- **Watch the video:** *Session 4: How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen* (30 minutes)
- **Read the book:** Chapter 5 of *How We Got the Bible* handbook
- **Consider the questions:** Review the group discussion questions provided in this Leader Guide and choose 2 or 3 questions. Also, spend some time considering the *Questions Participants May Ask*.
- See *Open the Session* for an idea about how to get class members thinking about the topic.
- If you are expanding the session (optional):
 - Study the key Bible passage: 2 Peter 1:1–2; 3:14–18
 - Review the participant study questions—also provided here in the Leader Guide.
 - If you are using the PowerPoint® presentation, review the slides about the books of the New Testament.
- Set up and test audio and video equipment beforehand.

Gathering Together

Open the Session (5 MINUTES)

Start the session with a teaser. Say to your group, did you know that ...?

- Jesus is actually the reincarnation of Seth, Adam and Eve's third son. [*Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians*]
- Jesus, as a boy, cursed another boy when he accidentally bumped into him. The boy died, and when the neighbors complained to Jesus' parents, Jesus used his miraculous powers to strike the neighbors blind. [*Gospel of Thomas*]
- Judas Iscariot was not a betrayer, but a hero to whom Jesus revealed the secrets of the universe—the only one of the disciples to truly understand Jesus. [*Gospel of Judas*]

Then explain: No, of course none of this is true. But these stories about Jesus are found in writings in the early centuries of Christianity. So why didn't these writings end up as part of the New Testament? That's what we'll learn in this session on the canon of the New Testament.

Take a Closer Look (30 MINUTES)

Watch the video *Session 4: How the Books of the New Testament Were Chosen*

Seek the Central Truth (30 MINUTES - OPTIONAL)

Key Bible Passage

Drawing from your personal study and from the study notes, guide participants in a discussion of 2 Peter 1:1–2; 3:14–18.

Study Notes:

Peter was one of the twelve original apostles and was an eyewitness to everything Scripture tells us about Jesus' ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Not only was he an apostle, but he was also one of Christ's

closest friends and a leader of the early church after Jesus returned to the Father.

“Faith” (1:1) can refer to trust in and commitment to Jesus Christ, or to a body of authoritative teaching, or else, to the Christian faith as a religious movement.²⁴ In light of this translation issue, we could translate “To those who have obtained a faith” as “To you who have received the true doctrine about Jesus Christ,” or “To you who God has caused to trust in Jesus Christ.”²⁵

“Our beloved brother” (3:15): Paul was Peter’s “beloved brother,” that is, a coworker in the gospel and fellow believer. Paul is also “our” brother, suggesting that Paul was a fellow worker and fellow apostle with Peter. Paul himself often emphasized that his apostolic calling was given by God (Romans 12:3; 15:15; 1 Corinthians 3:10; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 3:2, 7; Colossians 1:25); Peter clearly agreed.²⁶

“According to the wisdom given him” (3:15): God was the source of Paul’s wisdom.²⁷

“Ignorant” (3:16) translates a word used nowhere else in the New Testament. It means not simply ignorant but “unlearned,” “uneducated,” “uninstructed,” and is used primarily of people who have not received sufficient instruction in the interpretation of Scripture and are therefore prone to error. “Unstable” on the other hand describes those who are not firmly rooted in the teachings of the Christian faith and are therefore easily misled. The same word is used in 2:14, where it is translated as “unsteady.”²⁸

Study Questions:

1. What reasons did Peter give his readers to pay attention to this writing?

2. What do these words from Peter imply about Paul?

3. How does Peter describe the error of false teachers? How does Peter encourage his readers to combat these teachings?

PowerPoint® Presentation

Teach through the slides about the books of the New Testament.

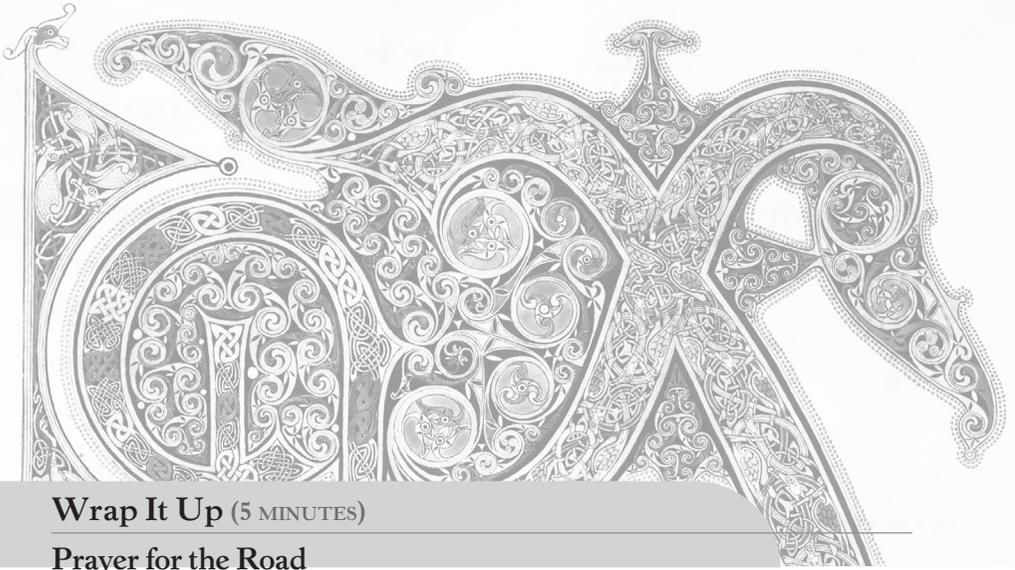
Get Them Talking (20 MINUTES)

Discuss two or more of these questions.

1. Why is it important to say that early Christians *recognized* the canon of Scripture instead of *created* it? What beliefs about God and his Word are we communicating by saying “recognized” instead of “created”?

2. Many writings that early Christians considered helpful and beneficial are *not* a part of the canon. What does this suggest about the New Testament books that *are* in the Bible?

3. Except for a few texts on the fringes of the canon, Christians throughout the world recognized the books of the New Testament as Scripture from the time they were written. How does this show God’s faithfulness in giving us his Word? How should this affect our attitude toward the Bible and its impact in our lives?



Wrap It Up (5 MINUTES)

Prayer for the Road

“Father in heaven, by your grace, help us to grow in our understanding of your Word. In this journey, protect us from error in our own thoughts and the false teaching of others. Amen.”

Application for Daily Life

The biblical authors often described the power God’s Word to combat all sorts of evil, including deceitful teachings. As a group, dedicate yourselves to encouraging and pushing each other to memorize and study Scripture.

Encourage students to read *How We Got the Bible* handbook this week: “Chapter 5: Who Created the New Testament Canon?”



Questions Participants May Ask

Can every book in the New Testament be connected to an eyewitness?

Yes! See this helpful table:

Book	Author
Matthew	Matthew, apostle and eyewitness of the risen Lord (Matthew 9:9; 10:3; Acts 1:13)
Mark	Mark, traveling companion and translator for Simon Peter (1 Peter 1:13); “Mark, in his capacity as Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately as much as he remembered.” (Papias of Hierapolis, 2 nd century)
Luke and Acts	Luke, traveling companion with Paul (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11); “Luke—the attendant of Paul—recorded in a book the Gospel that Paul declared.” (Irenaeus of Lyon, 2 nd century)
John	John, apostle and eyewitness of the risen Lord (Matthew 4:21; 10:2; Acts 1:13)
Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon	Paul, apostle and later eyewitness of the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8–10). Some scholars deny that Paul authored some of these texts because of changes in the writing style; however, since Paul wrote these letters over a period of two decades and composed them with a secretary, a change in style does not necessarily indicate a change in authorship.
Hebrews	Received by early Christians as a proclamation from Paul or as a reliable reflection of Paul’s theology written by someone else, based on the mention of Timothy (Hebrews 13:23). “Who wrote it, in truth, God only knows.” (Origen of Alexandria, 3 rd century)

Book	Author
James	James the Just, relative of Jesus and eyewitness of the risen Lord, recognized later as an apostle (Matthew 13:55; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Galatians 1:19; 2:9)
1 and 2 Peter	Peter, apostle and eyewitness of the risen Lord (Matthew 4:18; 10:2; Acts 1:13). Second Peter is so different from 1 Peter that many scholars deny that Simon Peter wrote 2 Peter. It is more likely that the shift between the two letters is due to different circumstances and different secretaries being involved in the composition of each letter.
1 John	John, apostle and eyewitness of the risen Lord (Matthew 4:21; 10:2; Acts 1:13)
2 and 3 John	John, apostle and eyewitness of the risen Lord (Matthew 4:21; 10:2; Acts 1:13); these epistles may have been written by another eyewitness named John, known as “John the elder,” mentioned by Papias of Hierapolis (2 nd century).
Jude	Jude, relative of Jesus and eyewitness of the risen Lord (Matthew 13:55)
Revelation	John, apostle and eyewitness of the risen Lord (Matthew 4:21; 10:2; Acts 1:13); it is possible, though unlikely, that Revelation was written by another eyewitness named John, known as “John the elder,” mentioned by Papias of Hierapolis (2 nd century).

Who created the New Testament canon?

No church council or bishop created the New Testament canon; instead, Christians recognized and received a canon that God created. This canon was breathed out by God as Christ-commissioned eyewitnesses and their close associates authored the books of the New Testament. A consensus emerged

no later than the second century regarding the Gospels, Acts, the letters of Paul, and at least the first letter from John. By the end of the fourth century, Christians had concluded that 27 texts—the same texts found in your New Testament still today—could be traced back to apostolic eyewitnesses and their associates.

Michael Kruger has delineated three stages in the development of the canon:

The ontological canon: as soon as a God-inspired eyewitness or associate of an eyewitness wrote the words breathed out by God, this text was canon, whether or not everyone recognized it yet.

The functional canon: Texts were received as canon and functioned as canon in the churches. Occasionally, Christians in certain locations may have received a text as canon that wasn't really canonical at all—but it's important to recognize that the core books of the New Testament (the Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, at least one letter from John) seem to have been received immediately and universally; there is no hint of any time when any of these texts was ever questioned.

The exclusive canon: When Athanasius of Alexandria sent out his Easter letter in AD 367, he was recognizing a consensus that had already emerged. Only 27 books could be traced back to apostolic eyewitnesses and their close associates and, therefore, only these 27 books should be recognized as New Testament canon.²⁹

How can we know that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were really the sources behind the Gospels?

Consistent and reliable traditions have connected the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John with these Gospels from the first century onward. Some scholars claim that the New Testament Gospels received their names in the same way that some of the “lost Gospels” received their titles—people wanted these writings to seem authoritative; so, they simply added names of eyewitnesses, even though these people really didn't write the Gospels at all. However, the Gospels According to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John seem to have been connected with their authors as soon as the Gospels began to circulate widely. Since some people who knew the authors would still have been alive; under these circumstances, it would have been difficult to ascribe false names to the Gospels without someone protesting.

Recommended Resources

1, 2 Peter, Jude, vol. 37 (*The New American Commentary*) by Thomas R. Schreiner (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003)



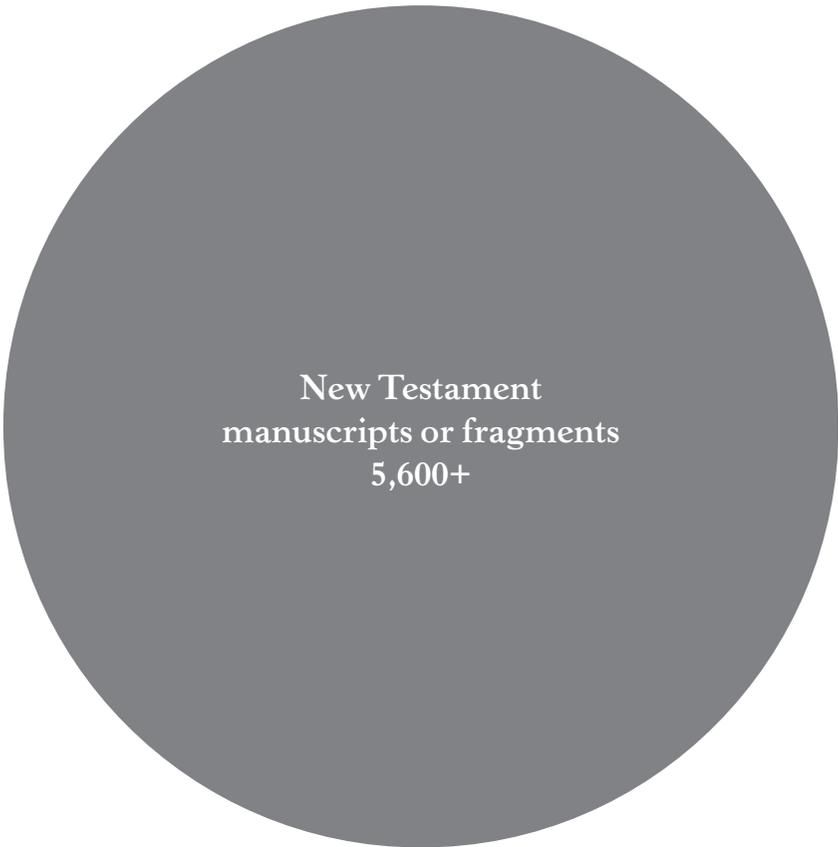
**Plato's
Tetralogies**
210



**Homer's
Iliad**
1,758



**Julius Caesar's
Gallic Wars**
10



**New Testament
manuscripts or fragments**
5,600+