

# Advent Course 2

How did the New Testament  
come to be in its Current Form?



# Introduction

1. Background and Context
2. Types of literature in the New Testament
3. What was kept in and what was excluded
4. Conclusion

# Background and Context

## 1. Books of the Early Church

1. The Old Testament
2. New Testament not used as a title for collection of Christian writings until 300AD
3. Continuity with the Old Testament

## 2. Church's Life and Work

1. New Testament writings came from living, witnessing, suffering, worshipping communities and people
2. The writings were shaped by their circumstances; i.e. making new converts, teaching about the faith, fighting heresy, solving moral problems, explaining the faith before hostile audience, bearing witness in face of persecutors
3. Not a systematic theology. *The New Testament is in no way a systematic theology covering all aspects of doctrine, practice, ethics, Christology.*

# Background and Context

3. Witness and Authority
  1. The early Christians formed themselves into communities marked by learning, sharing, the Lord's Supper and Baptism. (read Acts 2:42-47)
  2. The bond that held them together was the belief that Jesus is the Christ and that they must share this message with all people. This was the *Kerygma* Gk meaning herald's announcement. Telling the facts, the truth as if from the mouth of their master.
  3. The basis of the authority of their message is that it derives directly from the Apostolic tradition and witness.

# Types of Literature in the New Testament

## 1. The Gospels

1. *Gospel* (Anglo Saxon) = Good News. *Evangel* (GK) Good News. *Euangelion* (GK) evangelist, who writes a gospel or preaches good news.
2. Contain stories about Jesus life, death, Resurrection, message and ministry; Healing, miracles, teaching, encounters and clashes with Jewish religious authorities; **not** a biography, but an account.

# Types of literature in the New Testament

Synoptic Gospels and John. Gk *Syn* = together and from root for *optic* = seeing, so seeing together. The synoptic Gospels follow the same general pattern of Apostolic Proclamation (the *Kerygma*), but each derives from own sources and communities.

1. *Mark*: direct eye-witness account associated with the teaching of the Apostle Peter. Dates from the early 60's AD. Perhaps the earliest example of the weaving together of separate units of written and oral traditions into a continuous whole. Direct and Dramatic
2. *Matthew*: thought to be largely based upon Mark, written to help Christians understand their faith, arranged into larger sections, e.g. Sermon on the Mount Chs 5-7. Contains more of the teaching of Christ than Mark and is explicit about Jesus fulfilling OT prophecy about the Messiah.
3. *Luke/Acts*: Linked in style and dedication to Theophilus. Acts is Luke part 2. Luke was a companion of Paul (Col 4:14; Philemon 2:4; 2Tim 4:11) Luke uses unique material, which suggests another source.

# Types of literature in the New Testament

4. *John and the letters of John*: Gospel is non-synoptic i.e. cannot be arranged in a fourth column beside others.
  1. Unique and different in style. Characterised by long discourses e.g. John 12-17. They are not short pithy sayings or parables as in the Synoptics.
  2. Strong explicit link between God, Jesus and the disciples Jn14:6-14 and Jn16:27-28.
  3. The Gospel contains highly developed and reflective language – almost mystical.
  4. Later in date –100AD
  5. Based on Apostolic record, but far more theological and story like
  6. Perhaps written by a disciple of John
  7. Letters from the same tradition – use similar language and style

# Types of Literature in the New Testament

## The Letters of Paul and others

### 1. Uniqueness

1. In terms of contemporary literature, Paul's letters are unique. Other letters of the time deal with issues of business, family matters, bereavement. Paul's letters are not concerned with these, they are longer than most and largely consist of his advice and teaching on what it is to be a Christian. He almost certainly wrote them without any idea that they would become Scripture and have Authority. They were contextual and non-systematic. Other letters like Hebrews are anon. Or written by Peter, James, Jude



# Types of Literature in the New Testament

## The Letters of Paul and others

### 2. Concerns of the letters

1. Proclamation of the Gospel (see I Cor15:1-11 and Rom1:1-6)
2. Teaching – both Doctrine about what the Christian should believe (Rom8:1-17) and Ethics about the conduct of the Christian, how to behave to others, rel. with authority, family life, slaves etc. (Eph. 6:1-9)
3. Worship – conduct, Lord's Supper (1Cor 11:23-26)
4. Public instruction (Rom 9-11)
5. Use of the Old Testament – main concern to show that Jesus is the Christ and fulfils the OT prophecies about the Messiah. Death and Resn. Of Jesus are the climax and fulfilment of Jewish expectation. (Acts 2:16 Joel's Prophecy)

# Types of Literature in the New Testament

## 3. Revelation

1. Apocalypse Gk = unveiling
2. Context.
  1. Persecution. The Early Church were severely persecuted. Martyrdom, bearing witness through death. Story told in visionary, symbolic, picture language of the great battle bet. God and the evil forces of this world. Written in such a way to encourage the Christians to persevere in their faith under terrible circumstances and to have hope in Christ, the Suffering Lamb of God who is present with them in their suffering.
3. Now and Then.
  1. Message relevant to us today in terms of God's assurance of His presence with us in midst of our suffering. Also that in a very real sense, through the Death and Resn. Of Christ, the Victory is already won for us.

# What was excluded and what was kept in

## Christian Writings not included in the New Testament

1. **The Apostolic Fathers/Patristics** – Term used to describe the Christian writers from the early Church through to the early middle ages (examples follow – not an exhaustive list)
  1. 1st Letter of Clement, Bp of Rome AD 95; 2<sup>nd</sup> letter of Clement, no same author; 7 letters of Ignatius, Bp of Antioch, AD117; Letter of Polycarp, Bp of Smyrna to the Philippians AD 135; account of the Martyrdom of Polycarp AD 155; The Teaching of the Apostles AD60 aka Didache; Letter of Barnabas AD150; Shepherd of Hermas; Letter to Diognetus

# What was excluded and what was kept in

## Christian Writings not included in the New Testament

### 1. The Apostolic Fathers/Patristics

2. 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of Clement to the Corinthians expresses concerns re: disorders in an unruly church and contains info. Re: thought and org. of the Early Church. Letters of Ignatius address false teaching about Jesus, that he was never fully human or crucified or rose again. Written with intense passion and conviction. The Didache is a manual of Christian practice, but is primitive and doctrinally undeveloped. Letter of Barnabas treats the OT as a message from God in code pointing to Jesus as the Messiah. Shepherd of Hermas deals with issues such as why we continue to sin after Baptism and Repentance and Restoration. Letter to Diognetus suggests Jesus is merely an example to be followed.

# What was excluded and what was kept in

## Christian Writings not included in the New Testament

2. **Other Gospels and Writings** — e.g. book of James; Syriac Gospel of Thomas; History of Joseph the Carpenter; The Transition — the journey to Heaven of the Blessed Virgin Mary; the Gospel of Peter. Often not included because they are intellectually feeble, fanciful, fantastic, poor history. (see separate sheet for e.g.s) Many other Acts of John, Peter, Paul, Andrew, Thomas, and other letters and Apocalypses. From *Nag Hammadi* we have a large collection of non-canonical literature including the Gospel of Thomas, which contains the secret sayings of Jesus (see sep. sheet).

# What was excluded and what was kept in

**The Canon of the New Testament** – what led to the Canon being formed? Canon has both Gk and Hebrew origins and refers to a reed used as a test of straightness – a standard of correctness and authority.

1. Initially the Christian communities focused on the spoken witness of the Apostles who gave authoritative evidence of Jesus and the Resurrection. They passed on the Kerygma.
2. As the Apostles died it became important to record their testimony and so it was written down by their disciples and assistants. These testimonies formed the basis of Gospel accounts

# What was excluded and what was kept in

## The Canon of the New Testament — what led to the Canon being formed?

3. The process of collecting begins. Clement of Rome in his letter to the Corinthians tells them to “take up the letter of the blessed Apostle Paul so they were charged to keep Paul’s letter and value its teaching. Gradually over time these letters were brought together as a collection of writings and given authority by the Church.

# What was excluded and what was kept in

## The Canon of the New Testament – what led to the Canon being formed?

4. Four Gospel Canon. Mark is generally thought to be the earliest Gospel, so why didn't the Church just recognise his? When the others became known, why not make them into a single account? There was an attempt to do this by Tatian, called the Diatessaron, lit. "by means of four", but never became popular. Gospel of Matthew was the most popular for a time. Even the Gospel of Peter was given approval by Serapion, Bp of Antioch c. AD 200, but he withdrew this authority when he read it and discovered it contained heretical additions. Eventually the four we know were accepted because all could claim genuine Apostolic credentials, were based upon early authentic material, whilst the other gospels were later and less apostolic. Each of the Canonical Gospels were probably also associated with a particular Christian Community and each Comm. Fought for the inclusion of "their" Gospel. In AD 180 Irenaeus, Bp. Of Lyons affirms the 4 Gospel Canon



# Conclusion

**Canon** We must remember that the whole process was rather fluid and took place over a long period of time. At one stage certain books that are now in were out and others that are now out were in. An early Church historian Eusebius wrote of a list of books in AD 320 and Bp Athanasius in AD367 makes the first record of what we recognise as the New Testament.

**Tests for inclusion** three main criteria were used

1. Early date
2. Apostolic connections
3. Intrinsic soundness – quality of theological reflection – is it Good Theology?

**Closing of the Canon** settled to mark out against Heresy, that which the Church considered to be a true and genuine reflection of Christian Teaching, covering the life and work of Jesus, how to live the Christian Faith, useful for teaching and encouraging the church to witness and persevere in the face of persecution.

Out

lement 1 & 2

Letters of Ignatius

Polycarp

Martyrdom of Polycarp

Didache

Barnabas

Shepherd of Hermas

Piognetus

Gospels of James

Thomas, Peter.

Joseph the Carpenter

The Transition of Mary

Nag Hammadi docs.

Acts of John, Paul, Peter,  
Andrew and Thomas

Several Apocalypses

# Canon of the New Testament

Epistles

Gospels

Revelation

Early

Apostolic

Good Theology

In

Matthew, Mark, Luke,  
John.

Acts, Romans

1 & 2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 & 2 Thessalonians

1 & 2 Timothy

Titus, Philemon

Hebrews, James

1 & 2 Peter

1,2 & 3 John

Jude

Revelation