

Apostolic Canonization of the NT before AD 70 (Part 1)

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This article affirms that all 27 books of our New Testament were *written, collected, and certified* as authoritative by the apostles before they passed from the earthly scene just before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The word *canon* simply means the list of sacred writings considered by Christians as inspired, inerrant, and absolutely authoritative for all matters of doctrine and practice. Although the New Testament does not use the word *canon* or *canonical* in reference to its contents or to the collection of Old Testament books, the concepts of *canonicity* and *canonization* (including such concepts as inspiration, authority, direct revelation, and Scripture) are found in the New Testament. In this article, we will look at some New Testament contexts where these concepts are either implicitly or explicitly mentioned.

Contrary to the claims of the Roman Catholic Church, it did not give us the canon of Scripture—the Holy Spirit did. The Roman Church’s claim is based on the idea of *apostolic succession*. As we Protestants are quick to point out, the office of apostle (specifically the twelve “apostles” of Christ, not the apostles or missionaries of the churches like Barnabas or Mark) required direct eyewitness experience of the resurrected Christ, full inspiration and empowerment by the *Paraclete* (the Holy Spirit or “comforter”), and direct revelation and commission from Christ. The only exceptions to this were those whom Jesus directly commissioned (such as Paul and James) or those upon whom Peter and the apostles laid their hands (such as Mark, Luke, and Jude) using the canonical authority (“the keys of the Kingdom,” Matt 16:19) that Christ had given to Peter. That authority passed away permanently when Peter and the other inspired apostles and prophets left the earthly scene.

If that authority of Peter and the apostles had been given to each successive generation of church leaders (i.e., apostolic succession) after the passing of Peter and the apostles, it would mean that the gift of inspiration was also passed down perpetually, thus keeping the canon open forever. The Mormons especially, with their *Book of Mormon*, would love that idea of the canon still being open, as would the Moonies with their writings of Sun Myung Moon. The Roman Catholic idea of apostolic succession opens the door for all kinds of confusion and corruption to creep into the church, and cheapens the idea of the inspiration, inerrancy, and absolute authority of the true canon of Scripture.

However, this idea of a closed canon by the time of the passing of the apostles is a sword that cuts both ways. Not only does it rule out the Roman Church’s claim of having the right to decide the content of our canon, it rules out *all* other claims by Protestants (and the cults as well). What we are affirming here is that the apostles were the only ones who had the inspiration and authority to not only *write* inspired Scripture, but also to infallibly *decide* which books were authoritative. Subsequent church leaders were neither inspired, inerrant, eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ, nor directly commissioned by Him. This means that the only Christians who were ever qualified to set the boundaries of the New Testament canon were those very apostles who wrote the inspired books in the first place. This view is called *apostolic canonization*. It is not a new theory nor is it exclusive to Preterism (cf. Ernest L. Martin, *Restoring the Original*

Bible, 1994), but it is certainly consistent with the Preterist idea of a pre-70 date for all the NT books.

The challenge to both Protestants and Catholics is now clear: Does the New Testament contain historical evidence which demonstrates not only that the apostles *wrote* those inspired books, but also made an authoritative, *certified collection* of them? That is the burden of this series of articles, and to demonstrate this we must go back before the Athanasian Canon of the fourth century, before the Muratorian Fragment (late second century, ca. 170 AD), and even before the New Testament books were written, to look at the Old Testament basis for the development of a New Testament canon. We find a chain of canonical authority that begins with Moses and ends with “the prophet like Moses.”

The LORD said to me [Moses], “. . . I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put **My words** in his mouth, and he shall speak to them **ALL that I command him**. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to **My words** which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.” (Deut 18:17-19 NASB95)

[Peter speaking] Moses said, “The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to him you shall **give heed to everything** He says to you. And it will be that every soul that does not **heed that prophet** shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.” (Acts 3:22-23 NASB95)

While he [Peter] was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them [during the Transfiguration], and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; **listen to Him!**” (Matt 17:5 NASB95; cf. Luke. 9:35)

Jesus was the prophet like Moses who was to come. Moses was the archetype, both in the spoken word and the written word. Moses first spoke the word, and then later wrote it down. Christ certainly spoke the word, but did not write it down. But we can see in the pages of the New Testament that Jesus was making preparations through the Paraclete for His Word to be written down by His apostles and prophets. Interesting in this regard is Christ’s statement about the value of a scribe who became a disciple of the kingdom:

And Jesus said to them, “Therefore every **scribe** who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who **brings out of his treasure things new and old**.” (Matt 13:52 NASB95)

The scribe who became a disciple of Jesus would use his talents to produce treasures both **new** and old (note the word “new” here). None of the twelve apostles were scribes by trade, as far as we know. So this means Jesus anticipated some scribes becoming Christians and using their writing and copying skills to produce some “**new**” canonical Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the oversight of the twelve apostles. Both Mark and Luke might fit this scenario.

Several times Jesus mentions to the apostles the coming work of the Paraclete: “. . . do not worry about how or what you are to say, for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say, for it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matt 10:19-20)

NASB95). Jesus promised to send to them the Holy Spirit, Who would “teach you **ALL** things,” “bring to your remembrance **ALL** that I said to you,” “guide you into **ALL** the truth,” and “disclose to you what is to come” (John 14:26; 16:13 NASB95; emphasis mine). Notice the use of the word “**ALL**” in three of these phrases regarding the work of the Paraclete. This does not sound like the canon would be left open after the Paraclete finished giving them **ALL** things, **ALL** truth, and brought to their remembrance **ALL** that Jesus wanted them to teach. Nothing would be left out—the Holy Spirit would make sure **the whole** Word of Christ was completely revealed, taught, and written down—after which the canon would be closed.

Just before His ascension, Christ claimed that He had **ALL** authority [including canonical authority] in heaven and on earth, and therefore commissioned the twelve (and Paul later; see Rom 1:5 and Gal 1:1-16) to make disciples of **ALL** the nations and to teach them to observe **ALL** that He had commanded them, and that He would be with them **ALL** the days until the End of the Age (Matt 28:18-20; cf. Deut 18:18-19). Notice that the very authority (**ALL** authority in heaven and earth) which Jesus claimed to have, was the very authority Moses said that the prophet like him would have (Deut 18:19), and that the prophet like Moses would speak **ALL** that God commanded him to speak. Jesus said repeatedly to his disciples (Matt 11:27; John 3:35; 5:22; 13:3; 17:2) that the Father had given Him **ALL** the words and **ALL** the authority, and that He was now commissioning (authorizing) them to go and teach **ALL** the nations **ALL** that He had taught them. The King was sending out His authorized emissaries. Through the work of the Paraclete, Jesus passed **ALL** of His inspired words, as well as the authority (the authorization) to teach it and write it down and certify it as true, to Peter and the apostles. In addition to the great commission authority given generally to the twelve, Peter was also given the keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:19), which included canonical authority. Whatever Peter bound or loosed on earth was to be considered as being bound or loosed by Christ himself in heaven. But that authority was not passed on to succeeding generations of church leaders after Peter.

Christ sent the Paraclete to be with the apostles “**ALL** the days” (of their lifetime) to enable them to complete the great commission before the End of the Age. The Paraclete’s presence with them, and His work in and through them, would continue to the End of the Age. If the End of the Age is still future, then the Roman Catholic idea of apostolic succession must be true. However, it seems clear from Jesus’ use of the phrase “End of the Age” in Matthew 24:3 that “the end” refers to the end of the Jewish age in AD 70. This means that the disciples would have completed the proclamation of the gospel before the End of the Age in AD 70. Both the apostle Paul and Eusebius affirm that it was accomplished:

. . . [the] gospel . . . **has been made known to ALL the nations**. . . (Rom 16:25-27 NASB95, cf. Rom 10:18; 15:19)

. . . the gospel which has come to you, just as **in ALL the world** also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing . . . (Col 1:5b-6a NASB95)

. . . the gospel that you have heard, which was **proclaimed in ALL creation under heaven** . . . (Col 1:23 NASB95)

At that very time, indeed, the voice of his holy apostles “**went throughout ALL the earth, and their words to the end of the world**.” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.8.11 – Kirsopp Lake translation)

The exclusive authority to *deliver* Christ’s one true distinctive gospel was given *only* to the first-century apostles and prophets. Jesus gave Peter the keys of the Kingdom (Matt 16:19), so

that whatever he bound or loosed would be authoritative for **ALL** generations to come (“*once for ALL* delivered to the saints” Jude 3, emphasis mine). Whatever else this binding and loosing authority might have meant, it at least included the authority to write, collect, and certify the canon of Scripture. So if Peter allowed or disallowed something, it was considered as having been bound or loosed by Christ Himself. Evidently Peter recognized (canonized) James and Jude as inspired witnesses of their risen brother Jesus, the same way he recognized (canonized) Paul as an inspired witness of the resurrected Christ. According to tradition, Mark and Luke wrote under the supervision of Peter and Paul respectively. Jude 3 affirms that Peter and those whom Peter canonized did *deliver* (i.e., write, collect, and certify) that inspired canon faithfully:

Beloved, while I was making every effort to **write you** about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to **write to you** appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was **once for ALL handed down [delivered] to the saints**. (Jude 3 NASB95)

The canonical authority which Peter possessed was not passed down successively to each new generation of church leaders. After the passing of Peter and the other apostles from the earthly scene, no one has the authority to write, collect, or certify the canon because they are unable (neither inspired nor empowered) to do so. The Roman church failed to realize that the inspiration and empowerment was not passed down successively to each new head bishop of the Roman church. That failure raises a whole host of historical issues that need to be analyzed by Preterists as we continue the process of Reformation and Restoration.

Evangelical Christians affirm that the first-century apostles were inspired and their writings were canonical. But we have not all taken the next logical step to conclude that the *only* ones who could infallibly decide which books were canonical were those who had been divinely inspired to write them in the first place. The apostles, and Peter specifically, accomplished that *writing, collection* and *certification* of the canon before they left the earthly scene.

In the following articles, we will look more closely at each of these three steps in the process of delivering the canon to the saints: writing, collecting, and certifying. The burden of those holding the *apostolic canonization* view is to demonstrate that all three steps occurred during the lifetime and under the oversight of the twelve apostles (and Peter especially) in the first century before AD 70.