

PRIMARY QUESTIONS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

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Some scholars suppose the apostles did not consider their work as something for the subsequent ages of the church. They were writing for the then and there. They had supposed that Christ would return within the lifetime of some first-generation Christians. Writing for posterity did not enter their minds. If their literary activity took place under these conditions, collecting their writings to establish a permanent canon would not have been a concerted effort either. Only when it became evident that Christ would not immediately return did the early Christians begin to locate and assemble apostolic writings.

In this reconstruction, as Christians traveled, they became aware that Paul, Peter, John, and others had written to other churches. An informal effort followed until a significant body of literature came together. This undirected activity would allow for several levels of sensitivity in handling the apostolic writings. Conflations such as those proposed for 2 Corinthians would not be surprising, and no one would necessarily be the wiser, because the original pieces were not all well known throughout the Mediterranean region.

As an example of the process, the following experience might serve to illustrate. I preached at Medicine Lodge, Kansas, one Sunday. When I went back after the service to meet the young man operating the sound system, I discovered that he had made a tape of the sermon, according to regular procedure. The tapes were used for shut-ins or those who might want to listen to the sermon again. People who moved from one place to another might know about such items from their home churches, and eventually copies would be produced, obtained, collated, and arranged into a canon.

I. How did the New Testament writers conceive of their own writings?

- A. Galatians 1:8-9
- B. 1 Corinthians 7:40; 14:37
- C. 2 Peter 3:15-16
- D. Compare Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel
- E. 2 Peter 1:13-15 future anticipations

Does this imply partial
collections by each author?
What of selection?

II. How did the early recipients conceive of the letters they received? Aquila/Priscilla, Apollos, Barnabas, Demas, Epaphroditus, Epaphras, Mark, Luke, Onesimus, Phoebe, Silas, Sosthenes, Timothy, Titus, Tychicus

III. How did the associates of Paul and Peter regard the men whose office they served to extend: Onesimus, Tychicus, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Sosthenes, Mark, Luke, Demas, Barnabas, Apollos, Aquila/Prisca, Epaphroditus, Epaphras?

- A. Something of the recipients' regard for Paul is shown by their accepting his strong claims of authority over them.

B. Their regard for him is also shown in their involvement with him in the sometimes dangerous missionary enterprise.

IV. What evidence is there for immediate circulation of apostolic writings?

Circulating the letters leads to collecting the canon, because the several letters that would come to a given church would end up being an accumulating number there.

A. Letter to the Laodiceans/Colossians: Paul's command to exchange the letters (Colossians 4:16)

B. Ephesians, Galatians, Romans, Revelation, and all the general epistles, the authors intended to be encyclicals: stated destination was general. Compare the "copied" encyclical issued by the conference on circumcision (Acts 15:23-29; 16:4).

C. 1 Corinthians 1:2: anticipation of circulation (?)

D. Peter and his readers knew about Paul's letters (2 Peter 3:15-16). The value of this observation is that more than one writer's works would end up in collections held by individual churches in these provinces of Asia Minor.

E. 2 Timothy 4:13: "*bring the books and parchments*" (?)

F. The use of amanuenses