

The Apostles and the Writing of the New Testament

How the teaching of Jesus moved from oral proclamation to circulated letters to a canonical library — c. AD 30 to AD 100.

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: First in the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series, which traces Christianity from the Apostles through the present. This lesson covers the **first generation**; Lesson 2 will cover the **Apostolic Fathers** (c. 95–150 AD) — the generation that knew the Apostles personally and wrote the earliest Christian literature outside the New Testament.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

The New Testament did not arrive on stone tablets from heaven. It was written over about half a century by roughly ten different authors — almost all of them Jews — to real churches facing real crises. Most of the letters were written to fix a problem. Most of the Gospels were written as the eyewitnesses began to die. Understanding how that happened strengthens our confidence in what we read on Sunday — because it was *already being read* on Sundays by Christians who had met the Apostles.

This lesson answers four questions: **(1)** Who were the Apostles? **(2)** What did they write, when, and for whom? **(3)** How did oral teaching become written Scripture? **(4)** How did the early

church recognize which books were and were not Scripture?

PART 1 — THE APOSTOLIC CIRCLE

“Apostle” (Greek *ἀπόστολος*, *apostolos*) means “one sent out.” In the New Testament the word carries two related meanings: the **Twelve** whom Jesus chose during his earthly ministry, and a wider circle of commissioned witnesses including Paul, Barnabas, and others.

Greek NT (Mark 3:14): και ἔποιήσεν δώδεκα, οὓς και ἀποστόλους ὠνόμασεν, ἵνα ᾧσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ και ἵνα ἀποστέλλῃ αὐτοῦς κηρύσσειν.

Mark 3:14 (ESV): “And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach.”

The Twelve (per Matthew 10:2–4, with parallels in Mark 3, Luke 6, and Acts 1): Simon Peter, Andrew, James (son of Zebedee), John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddaeus (Lebbaeus / Judas son of James), Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot. After Judas’ betrayal, Matthias was chosen by lot to replace him (Acts 1:26).

Paul (Saul of Tarsus) stands on his own line. He was not one of the Twelve; he was added by a direct commissioning of the risen Christ on the Damascus road (Acts 9). He defends his apostleship in 1 Corinthians 9:1 and Galatians 1–2, insisting that his gospel came “not from any man” but by revelation (Gal 1:12).

Who wrote what? A fast map:

- **Peter** → 1 and 2 Peter; traditionally the authority behind Mark’s Gospel (Papias, early 2nd century).
- **John** → Gospel of John, 1–3 John, Revelation.
- **Matthew** → Gospel of Matthew.
- **Paul** → 13 letters traditionally ascribed to him (Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon).
- **Luke**, a Gentile physician and companion of Paul → Luke’s Gospel and Acts.
- **James**, the brother of the Lord (not one of the Twelve) → the Epistle of James.

- **Jude**, also a brother of the Lord → Jude.
- **Hebrews** → anonymous from the first line; ancient guesses included Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, and Priscilla. The early Eastern church generally accepted Pauline authorship; the West was slower.

PART 2 — THE WRITINGS, IN ROUGH ORDER

The New Testament as bound in our Bibles is not in chronological order. If we re-sort by approximate date of composition, we can watch the church's self-understanding develop in real time.

Approx. date	Book	Author / Audience	Occasion
c. 48–49	Galatians	Paul / Galatian churches	Circumcision controversy; defense of justification by faith
c. 49	James	James of Jerusalem / diaspora Jewish Christians	Wisdom letter on faith and works
c. 50–51	1–2 Thessalonians	Paul / Thessalonica	Persecution; return of Christ
c. 53–57	1–2 Corinthians, Romans	Paul / Corinth, Rome	Church disorder; systematic presentation of the gospel
c. 60–62	Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon	Paul / written from prison	Christ as Lord over the cosmos and the church
c. 62–64	1 Peter	Peter / churches of Asia Minor	Encouragement under Roman suspicion

Approx. date	Book	Author / Audience	Occasion
c. 63–67	1–2 Timothy, Titus	Paul / his co-workers	Church order and pastoral charge
c. 65–70	Mark	John Mark / Roman Christians	First written Gospel; Peter's memory
c. 65–70	Hebrews	Anonymous / Jewish Christians tempted to return to Temple worship	Christ as superior high priest
c. 65–68	2 Peter, Jude	Peter; Jude / mixed audiences	Warnings against false teachers
c. 70–85	Matthew, Luke, Acts	Matthew; Luke / Jewish and God-fearing audiences	Jesus as the Christ; the mission to the Gentiles
c. 85–95	Gospel of John, 1–3 John	John the Apostle / churches around Ephesus	Christ's divinity; response to proto-Gnosticism
c. 90–96	Revelation	John / seven churches of Asia	Vision under Domitianic pressure

Note on dating: these are the ranges most commonly given by evangelical and mainstream historical scholarship. Some conservative scholars place Mark as early as the mid 50s and John as early as the 60s. The key point: **every New Testament book was probably written within one human lifetime of Jesus' death and resurrection**, by eyewitnesses or their direct associates.

PART 3 — FROM ORAL TRADITION TO WRITTEN TEXT

For roughly twenty years after the resurrection, Christian teaching was mostly oral. The reason is not sinister; it is practical. The Apostles were alive. They could be asked. Travelling preachers carried the same story from town to town because they had *heard* it from the same small circle.

Paul's earliest letter (Galatians, c. AD 48) already assumes his readers know the gospel story without his having to retell it.

Three pressures pushed that oral teaching onto parchment:

1. Geography. As the gospel spread — Antioch, Philippi, Corinth, Rome — Paul could not be in every church at once. Letters filled the gap. We have thirteen of them.

2. Controversy. False teaching — Judaizers insisting on circumcision, proto-Gnostics denying Christ's humanity — forced written doctrinal response. Galatians exists because of the first; 1 John exists because of the second.

3. The death of the eyewitnesses. By the mid-60s Peter and Paul had both been martyred in Rome (traditionally under Nero, c. AD 64–67). James of Jerusalem had been stoned in AD 62 (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1). James son of Zebedee had been killed years earlier (Acts 12:2). The generation that had walked with Jesus was dying. If the story was not preserved now, it would not be.

This is why Luke opens his Gospel with a deliberate historical statement:

Greek NT (Luke 1:1–4): Ἐπειδήπερ πολλοὶ ἐπεχείρησαν ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν... καθὼς παρέδοσαν ἡμῖν οἱ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται γενόμενοι τοῦ λόγου...

Luke 1:1–4 (ESV): “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us... it seemed good to me... to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”

PART 4 — WHOSE HAND ACTUALLY WROTE ROMANS?

A detail often missed in our English Bibles surfaces when we read the closing greetings of Romans 16. Paul has finished the most carefully argued letter of his life. He has named twenty-seven co-workers, most of them people he wants the Roman church to greet by name. And then, tucked between verse 21 and verse 23, a voice breaks in that is not Paul's:

Greek NT (Rom 16:22): ἀσπάζομαι ὑμᾶς ἐγὼ ἑ Τέρτιος ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἐν κυρίῳ.

Romans 16:22 (ESV): “I Tertius, who wrote this letter (ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολήν), greet you in the Lord.”

Paul did not hold the pen. He dictated Romans to a scribe named **Tertius**, who inserts his own greeting at the end. This was standard ancient practice: the Greek term is *amanuensis*, a professional or trained scribe who took dictation. In the 50s AD, writing on papyrus with a reed pen was slow, skilled work. An educated traveller like Paul would dictate; a skilled scribe would inscribe. Paul is the *author*; Tertius is the *writer*. Both are real, and the New Testament wants us to know both.

Two other people move through Romans 16 who are just as essential to how we got this letter:

- **Phoebe the deacon (Rom 16:1–2)** — “a servant (διάκονον, *diakonon*) of the church at Cenchreae.” Paul commends her to the Romans and asks them to “help her in whatever she may need from you.” Scholars across the theological spectrum agree she was almost certainly the *letter-carrier* — the person who physically brought Paul’s letter from Corinth to Rome and read it aloud to the Roman house-churches. Every English translation of Romans you have ever held is downstream of Phoebe’s delivery.

- **Gaius and the house-church (Rom 16:23)** — Paul is dictating from Corinth, where Gaius is hosting the whole church in his home. Tertius is almost certainly a member of that congregation. The letter we now call “Romans” was produced in a *room*, by a *team*, and carried by a *woman*.

How we know this is a pattern, not a one-off. Paul regularly used scribes and then signed his letters personally at the end — the ancient equivalent of a signature authenticating the document:

Greek NT (1 Cor 16:21): ὁ ἀσπασμοὺς τῆ ἐμῆ χειρὶ Παύλου.

1 Corinthians 16:21 (ESV): “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.”

Greek NT (Gal 6:11): ἴδετε πηλίκους ὑμῖν γράμμασιν ἔγραψα τῆ ἐμῆ χειρὶ.

Galatians 6:11 (ESV): “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.”

Greek NT (2 Thess 3:17): ὁ ἀσπασμοὺς τῆ ἐμῆ χειρὶ Παύλου, ὃ ἐστὶν σημεῖον ἐν πάσῃ ἐπιστολῇ.

2 Thessalonians 3:17 (ESV): “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.”

Colossians 4:18 (ESV): “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.”

The pattern is unmistakable. For most of a letter, Paul’s scribe writes neat professional script; then at the close Paul takes the pen and — evidently in a visibly larger, rougher hand (Gal 6:11) — signs his own greeting. This was how the Roman world authenticated a document. It also means that when we read Romans, **three Christians have put ink on our manuscript**: Paul the author (speaking), Tertius the scribe (writing), and Phoebe the deacon (carrying). Scripture honors each of them by name.

Peter did the same. At the end of 1 Peter he names his own amanuensis:

Greek NT (1 Pet 5:12): Δια Σιλουανοῦ ὑμῖν τοῦ πιστοῦ ἀδελφοῦ, ὡς λογιζομαι, δι’ ὀλίγων ἔγραψα.

1 Peter 5:12 (ESV): “By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you.”

What this tells us theologically. The doctrine of inspiration has sometimes been imagined as a lonely apostle hearing divine dictation and writing it down. Romans 16:22 and its parallels quietly correct that picture. The Spirit worked through Paul’s mind, Tertius’s pen, and Phoebe’s feet. Inspiration is a team sport. The Apostle’s authority is not diminished by naming his scribe;

it is dignified by it. And the church that received these letters received them as *a letter the Lord sent us through Paul, by Tertius, in the hand of Phoebe*. That is how God works with his people: in communion, with many members, none of them dispensable.

PART 5 — HOW THE APOSTLES' OWN WORDS WERE CIRCULATED

Paul's letters were read aloud in the gathered church on the Lord's Day (1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16) and then copied and passed along. Colossians and Philemon were evidently carried by the same courier, Tychicus. Within a generation, churches were trading copies of the Apostles' letters the way small churches today trade study guides.

By the time 2 Peter was written, Paul's letters were already circulating as a recognizable collection, and being treated with the authority of Scripture:

Greek NT (2 Pet 3:15–16): καθω`ς και` ο` αγαπητο`ς ημῶν ἀδελφο`ς Παῦλος... ἔγραψεν ὑμῖν... ἃ οἱ ἀμαθεῖς και` ἀστήρικτοι στρεβλοῦσιν ὡς και` τα` ἄλοιπα` ἡ γραφάς.

2 Peter 3:15–16 (ESV): "...our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you... as he does in all his letters... which the ignorant and unstable twist, as they do the other Scriptures (γραφάς)."

That single Greek word — *graphas* — is electric. Peter (or one writing in his name) places Paul's letters alongside the Hebrew Scriptures. Within a single apostolic generation, the apostolic writings are already being read as Scripture.

PART 6 — THE BEGINNING OF CANON CONSCIOUSNESS

The word "canon" (Greek *κανών*, a measuring-reed) came to mean the authoritative list of books. A full formal list is a later development; but the *instinct* of canon — **these writings are apostolic, Spirit-breathed, and binding on the churches** — is present already in the first generation.

• **Internal testimony.** Paul distinguishes his apostolic commands from personal advice (1 Cor 7:10, 12) and expects his letters to be read in public worship (1 Thess 5:27). Revelation pronounces a blessing on hearers and a curse on those who add to the words of the prophecy (Rev 22:18–19).

• **Four criteria emerged** over the next two centuries for recognizing which books belonged to the apostolic deposit: *apostolicity* (written by an Apostle or direct associate), *orthodoxy* (doctrinally consistent with the apostolic teaching), *catholicity* (received by churches across the empire), and *liturgical use* (actually read in the assembled church on the Lord's Day).

• **The first surviving partial list — the Muratorian Fragment** — is commonly dated around AD 170–200. It already lists the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen Pauline letters, Jude, two letters of John, and Revelation — the spine of our New Testament.

• **Some books were debated** longer than others: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, Revelation. A few non-canonical writings (the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, 1 Clement) were highly respected in certain regions but were eventually *not* received as Scripture.

• **Councils did not create the canon; they recognized it.** The Councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397) in North Africa produced the first formal conciliar lists of the 27 New Testament books we use today. Athanasius' *39th Festal Letter* (AD 367) gave the same list a generation earlier. These gatherings ratified what the praying, worshipping, martyr-producing church had already been using for centuries.

The *Church History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (c. AD 325, Book 3.25) preserves an invaluable fourth-century snapshot: he divides Christian writings into *homologoumena* (universally accepted), *antilegomena* (disputed), and *rejected* — giving us a window into the century just before formal conciliar action.

“Now these [the Bereans] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

— **Acts 17:11, ESV**

“All Scripture is breathed out by God (θεόπνευστος) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

— **2 Timothy 3:16–17, ESV**

“Many have undertaken to compile a narrative... just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us.”

— **Luke 1:1–2, ESV**

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest, and we have seen it and testify to it...”

— **1 John 1:1–2, ESV**

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

The New Testament reached us because a small group of first-century witnesses and their direct associates *wrote it down* — under persecution, while travelling, from prison cells — and because small churches scattered from Jerusalem to Rome loved it enough to copy, read, and die for it. The canon was not voted on; it was *recognized*, the way a mother recognizes her child’s voice on the phone. The books that made it in were the ones the churches already could not live without.

This gives us two disciplines. First, a deep **confidence**: the Bible we open on Sunday is not a later invention. Its earliest readers were catechumens who had shaken Peter’s hand. Second, a

deep **reverence**: each book arrived somewhere, for someone, at a cost. We read it best when we read it as the church that first received it did — aloud, on the Lord’s Day, among brothers and sisters, expecting to be changed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the three “pressures” that turned oral teaching into Scripture (geography, controversy, the death of witnesses) still shapes how our church teaches today?

2. Peter calls Paul’s letters “Scriptures” within living memory of their writing (2 Pet 3:16). What does that tell us about how fast the early church recognized apostolic authority?

3. Four criteria for canonicity — apostolicity, orthodoxy, catholicity, liturgical use — still operate when we test a teaching today. Which one do you find hardest to apply?

4. The earliest readers heard these letters aloud. What changes for you if you read a New Testament letter aloud this week, standing?

5. Luke insists on “orderly account” and “certainty” (Luke 1:3–4). What kind of certainty does Scripture actually offer — and what kind does it not?

6. Romans 16 names *Tertius* the scribe and *Phoebe* the letter-carrier. How does it change your reading of Romans to know that Paul was the author but not the hand, and that a woman from Cenchreae carried it to Rome?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we thank you for the Apostles you chose, the witnesses you kept, and the letters you carried through fire and time to our hands. Thank you for Peter's boldness, John's love, Luke's care, and Paul's pen. Thank you for Tertius, whose hand wrote Romans; for Silvanus, who wrote with Peter; for Phoebe, who brought your word from Corinth to Rome. Thank you that you work through teams, not lone heroes — through apostles and scribes and deacons together. Give us their honesty, their nerve, and their hunger for the voice of Jesus. Help us to read your Word not as a museum piece but as the living speech of the living Christ to the gathered church. We confess that every book we open was paid for in the blood of witnesses and the labor of many hands. Make us faithful readers and faithful handers-on. Through Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources (public domain):

- Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3.24–25 (lists of accepted / disputed books).
- Papias of Hierapolis (preserved in Eusebius), on Mark and Matthew.
- The Muratorian Fragment (c. AD 170–200).
- Athanasius, *39th Festal Letter* (AD 367).
- Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397).

Modern studies:

- **Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*** (3rd ed., Baker Academic, 2012) — the structural backbone of this church-history series. Noll's narrative begins with the Fall of Jerusalem (AD 70); this lesson sets up the apostolic prelude he assumes.
- F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (1988).
- Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (1987).

- Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited* (2012).
- Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2nd ed. 2017).

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