

THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

We have now reached the last part of the New Testament, which comprises letters written by the apostles, and the Book of Revelation to the Apostle John.

It is apparent that we have only a few of the many letters that were actually written by the apostles. For example, in 1 Corinthians 5:9 the Apostle Paul says "I wrote unto you in my letter ..." But we only have two letters to the Corinthians in our Bible. So what we call the First Letter to the Corinthians, was actually the second. And in our First Letter, Paul replies to a number of questions that the Corinthians had previously sent to him, in another letter which has not been preserved. With many of the letters we have to be detectives, reading between the lines to guess the background and the circumstances in which they were written. It is a bit like being in the room when your daughter is talking to her friend on the telephone, and you cannot hear the person at the other end.

How did these particular letters come to be in the Bible? That is an interesting question. Apart from all those letters which were not preserved, we know there were also spurious letters written by people with an axe to grind, pretending to be apostles. Paul refers to this regrettable development in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, warning his friends not to be alarmed by, amongst other things, "a letter seeming to be from us". It is for this reason that Paul always signed off his letters himself. Usually he dictated his letters, so they were written in different styles of handwriting, depending on who was his secretary at the time. But his signature confirmed they were genuine - "*I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand*", he says. "*This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write*" (2 Thessalonians 3:17). Thus after the First Century there were many letters (and gospels, too) in circulation, some of which were genuine, and some false.

The same situation had been true of the Old Testament writings, but the Jews had decided long before the time of Christ which of those earlier writings were reliable. The decisions about the New Testament books were made by the leaders of the early Church, classifying some as genuine and inspired by God, others as doubtful (these were grouped together in a collection known as the **Apocrypha**), and still others as downright cheats to be rejected, such as the **Shepherd of Hermas** and the **Gospel of Thomas**. **Athanasius**, writing in 367 AD, lists all 39 of our New Testament books. The subject of determining what is known as 'the **Canon of Scripture**' is covered in a very readable book with that title, written by F. F. Bruce.