

“The Canonicity of the Bible, part 3”

Various passages

Over the last two Wednesday nights, we’ve been considering the subject of **canonicity** which simply refers to how we know that we have the right books. The word ‘canonicity’ means rule or standard of measurement. Over time, the word ‘canon’ also came to mean a catalog or list—used in this case to describe the authoritative list of books that make up the Bible. In our study so far, we’ve considered doctrines such as revelation and inspiration. Well, the doctrine of ‘canonization’ tells us how the Bible received its acceptance as men recognized the authority of God’s inspired writings. It is the process by which the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God was recognized as such by men of God and then collected and preserved by the people of God.

The Bible contains 39 books in the Old Testament, and 27 books in the New Testament. How do we know that we have the right books? Consider:

- Why are the apocryphal books not included in our Bible?
- Why is the Book of Mormon not inspired Scripture?
- How do we know that we have all the books that God wants us to have?

All of these are questions that deal with the subject of **canonicity**.

The Bible is one book from one divine Author, though it was written over a period of some 1500 years by approximately 40 different men. Beginning with the record of creation in Genesis 1-2, written by Moses around 1400 BC, and extending to the account of eternity future in Revelation 21-22, written by the apostle John around 95 AD, God progressively revealed Himself and His redemptive purpose in the inspired Scriptures.

How can we know which books were to be included in the canon of Scripture and which ones were to be excluded? I pointed out to you last week how, over the centuries, three widely recognized principles were used to affirm those writings that constituted inspired and divine revelation. Consider:

1. *The writing had to have been authored by a recognized **prophet** or **apostle** or by someone closely associated with one. (Authenticity)*
2. *The writing could not disagree with or **contradict** any previous Scripture. (Authority)*
3. *The church had to display a general **consensus** that a writing was an inspired book. (Antiquity)*

We've looked at how the Old Testament was written, as well as the various non-canonical texts that were written known as the Apocrypha. Tonight, I want us to take a look at how we came to have the 27 books of the New Testament. Most of the books of the developing New Testament were acknowledged from early on, and the first list of all 27 appeared in 367.¹ For instance:

*“Again it is not tedious to speak of the books of the New Testament. These are, the four gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Afterwards, the Acts of the Apostles and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John.” —**Athanasius** (367 AD)*

¹ Gregg R. Allison, *50 Core Truths of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 57.

When various councils met early on in church history to consider the canon, they held no official vote for the canonicity of a book but rather recognized universally after the fact that it was written by God and belonged in the Bible.²

Internal evidence shows how the writers of the New Testament assumed the existence of authoritative, canonical Old Testament Scriptures. In other words, there was an objective body of truth to appeal to. The concept was not foreign to the writers of the New Testament, nor was it added sometime later.

Luke 24:27—“And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”

John 5:39—“You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me.”

Acts 17:2—“And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures.”

Romans 15:4—“For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

The point here is that for the church to begin to govern its life and doctrine by more than this authoritative canon of Scriptures (Old Testament), something similar in authority and limitation would be necessary. It involved an enlarged and expanded canon that came together in the same way as the Old Testament.

Couple this with the fact that Jesus was recognized by the early church as having authority equal to and beyond the Old Testament Scriptures. Consider:

² John MacArthur, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), Kindle loc 2973.

Matthew 7:29—“He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”

Matthew 5:38-39—“You have heard that it was said, ‘AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’ But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Mark 13:31—“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.”

Matthew 12:41-42—“The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.”

John 14:6—“Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.”

Matthew 28:18—“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”

Hebrews 1:1-2—“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.”

Jesus is the Word made flesh who came to dwell among us. Truth incarnate!

The point here is that the teaching of Jesus would inevitably lead to an expansion of the canon of the early church. The Old Testament would be supplemented by what Jesus taught and did. The challenge then for the early church would be how to **limit** what is inevitably opened by the coming and teaching of Jesus.

Theologically, a closed canon of the New Testament is what we would expect in accord with what God has inspired and preserved for us in the Old Testament.

Norman Anderson has said:

“If we accept [Jesus’] testimony to the God-given authority of the Old Testament, it would seem intrinsically unlikely that the most stupendous event in human history—in the life, death and resurrection of its incarnate Lord...would have been left by the God who had revealed it in advance without any authoritative record or explanation for future generations.”³

Jesus Himself pointed in this direction and prepared the early church to expect that He not only planned a canon of teaching concerning Himself and his Word, but that He would provide for it as well through His authorized apostles and inspiration.

Luke 6:13-16—“And when day came, He called His disciples to Him; and chose twelve of them, whom He also named as apostles: Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James and John; and Philip and Bartholomew; and Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot; Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”

Acts 1:26—“And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.”

³ Norman Anderson, *God’s Word for God’s World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 124.

John 14:24-26—“He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me. These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”

John 16:12-14—“I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you.”

The early church saw the teaching that emerged from Jesus and the apostles as comprising a completed body of authoritative truth about the faith. The inspired writings of the New Testament apostles were on the same level as the inspired writings of the Old Testament prophets.

Jude 3—“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 delivered to the saints.”

Paul viewed apostolic teaching as the unrepeatable foundation of the church and saw his own teaching as the expression of the Lord’s very words and commands. The church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets:

Ephesians 2:19-20—“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.”

2 Corinthians 13:3—“You are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.”

1 Corinthians 14:37—“If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment.”

1 Corinthians 2:12-13—“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.”

Peter saw Paul’s writings as part of a growing canon of Scripture along side the Old Testament Scriptures. This is a major internal evidence:

2 Peter 3:16 - “[Paul wrote to you] In all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.”

With this trajectory toward a new canon that would give authorized record of the life and teaching of Jesus and the foundational teachings of his authoritative spokesmen, what remained for the early church to do was to **discern** which writings were the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to the apostles and which writings were not.

The rise of heretical teachings and the use of distorted books (Marcion, 140 AD) spurred the process of canonization. How did the church do that?

There is evidence in history that indicates the very first believers collected and preserved the inspired books of the New Testament. These books were circulated among the early churches and doubtlessly copied as well. But since no official listing had been promoted, universal recognition of a list was delayed several centuries until the pressures had brought about the need for such a list.⁴

As far as dates go, the books of the New Testament were written during the last half of the first century. Most of them were written to local churches, such as the epistles from Paul. Some were addressed to individuals. Other books were aimed at a more broad audience, such as the first letter of Peter.

Geisler states:

“With such a geographical diversity of origin and destination it is understandable that not all the churches would immediately possess copies of all the inspired New Testament books. Add to this the problems of communication and transportation and it is easy to see that gaining a general recognition of all twenty seven books of the New Testament canon would take some time. These difficulties notwithstanding, the early churches immediately began to make collections of whatever apostolic literature they could verify.”⁵

The main criterion was apostolic nature. Not just, “Was the book written by an apostle,” but also, “Was it written in the company of an apostle, presumably with his help and endorsement.” Apostolic authority was the main factor.

Matthew: apostle

⁴ Norman Geisler, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 133.

⁵ Ibid.

Mark: Peter's interpreter and assistant (Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis 60-140: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered" in Eusebius, EH III, 39.15)

Luke: close associate and partner of Paul (known from Acts)

John: apostle

13 epistles of Paul: apostle

Hebrews: from the Pauline circle (Hebrews 13:22-24, "But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I shall see you. Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you.")

James: Jesus' brother called an apostle probably in Galatians 1:19 ("But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.")

1 & 2 Peter: apostle

1, 2, & 3 John: apostle

Jude: brother of James

Revelation: by John the apostle

The most controversial books that took the longest to confirm themselves for the whole church were Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Jude. The issues surrounding it had to do with authorship and certain doctrinal claims. (i.e. Does James contradict Paul on the nature of saving faith?) But in the end the church discerned their harmony with the others as well as their apostolic authenticity. The core list apart from the controversial books was known at the latest in the latter second century (Irenaeus, 180 AD). The first list known to us with all 27

books is in the 'Letters' of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in AD 367. This list was affirmed by the Council of Hippo in AD 393.⁶

The process of canonization was at work from the very beginning. Geisler says:

*"The first churches were exhorted to select only the authentic apostolic writings. When a book was verified as authentic either by signature or by apostolic envoy, it was officially read to the church and then circulated among other churches. Collections of these apostolic writings began to take form in apostolic times. By the end of the first century all twenty-seven books were written and received by the churches. The canon was complete and all the books were recognized by believers. Because of the multiplicity of false writings and the lack of immediate access to the conditions related to the initial acceptance of a book, the debate about the canon continued for several centuries, until the church universal finally recognized the canonicity of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament."*⁷

F. F. Bruce puts it like this:

"What is particularly important to notice is that the New Testament canon was not demarcated by the arbitrary decree of any Church Council. When at last a Church Council – the Synod of Hippo in AD 393 – listed the 27 books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity." (The Books and the Parchments, pp. 112-113.)

What is the New Testament canon? It is seen in its four-fold division:

Four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

⁶ Geisler, 140.

⁷ Geisler, 136-137.

One Book of History: Acts

Twenty-One Letters: 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, and Jude.

One Book of Prophecy: Revelation

All together, the 39 authoritative and inspired books of the Old Testament with the 27 authoritative and inspired books of the New Testament make up the 'canon' of Scripture. The Bible you hold in your hand is supernatural in its composition.

How do we know that we have the right books in the canon of Scripture that we now possess? How do we know that we have all the books that God intended us to have? Let me give you four principles:

1. The AUTHORITY of Christ

Jesus Christ, who is the full and final revelation of God, promised that the apostles would be led by the Holy Spirit into all the truth (John 16:13). He had taught them, and the Holy Spirit would help them to recall everything that He had said.

Since Jesus spoke with the authority of God, then apostolic doctrine must contain what Jesus had promised. The only record we have of apostolic teaching is the New Testament. Every book of the New Testament was written by an apostle or by someone under his authority.

2. The PROVIDENCE of God

God always finishes what He starts! In understanding of God's providence, we can conclude that He would not inspire any books that He did not also preserve.

It would be totally contrary to God's nature and practice not to preserve truths He produced for the well-being of His church.⁸

3. The TESTIMONY of history

Not only did God preserve the books of the New Testament, but it is also clear that the early church recognized these books. Down through the centuries, the Christian church has acknowledged them to be the only inspired books we have from the hand of the apostles. It is based on historical fact!

4. The WITNESS of the Spirit

Just as the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, so also does the Holy Spirit bear witness that the Bible is the Word of God. Consider what the apostle John wrote:

1 John 5:9-10—“If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that He has borne concerning His Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself.”

Authority of Christ, providence of God, testimony of history, witness of the Spirit!

The God of **creation** and the God of **salvation** is also the God of **preservation** —He has preserved His Word throughout history and for all future generations to come.

⁸ Geisler, 158-159