

Your Word is Truth (John 17:17)

Session 3

Canonicity of the Bible¹

In this third session we'll focus on three topics.

1. The principles of canonicity.
2. The process of canonicity
3. Non-canonical books.

Let's begin by looking at our first topic.

1. The principles of canonicity.

In the Hebrew Old Testament the word canon is qaneh (Eze.40:3, 42:16). In Ezekiel 40 we were told that there was a person with a measuring reed in his hand, this measuring reed is the same as the word canon.

It's important to note that in the Old Testament the Jews did not use the word canon to refer to the scriptures, rather they used phrases such as, "the word of the Lord" or "the Spirit said".

In the Greek New Testament the word canon is Kanon which can be translated, measuring rod, rule, staff, or norm. In Galatians 6 Paul used this word to refer to a moral code of conduct.

Theologically the word canon was applied in the fourth century AD, by Athanasius who referred to the Bible as the canon. In other words he was referring to those books which meet the standard of inspiration.

When we talk about canonization we are not talking about the origin of scriptures such as inspiration; rather the focus of canonization focuses on how the 66 books of the Bible we're recognized as the word of God by the church as a whole.

¹ Notes are based on Lectures by Joseph Holden of Calvary Chapel.

Let's contrast some incorrect views with some correct views of canonization.

| Incorrect | Correct |
|---|---|
| 1. The church determines the canon. | 1. The church discovers the canon. The Bible was established before the church discovered it. |
| 2. The church is the mother of the canon, or the church produced the canon. | 2. The church is the child of the canon, they were used to write the canon but the source is God. |
| 3. The church is the magistrate or the head of the canon. | 3. The church is the minister of the canon; we are stewards of the word. |
| 4. The church is the regulator of the canon. | 4. The church is the recognizer of the canon. We recognize which scriptures are in or out. |
| 5. The church is the judge of the canon. | 5. The church is the witness of the canon. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 6. The church is the master of the canon. | 6. The church is the servant of the canon. |
| 7. The church takes the place of God looking down on the scripture. | 7. The church takes the place of man looking up to God. |
| 8. The authority of the canon is based on the church. | 8. The church is based on the canon. |

- The test of canonicity.

A book had to meet the following criteria in order to be recognized by the church as the word of God.

1. Was it written by a prophet, Apostle or an associate of an Apostle? In other words does the book itself claim to be the word of God? Does it contain phrases such as the word of the Lord came to me? Does it contain authoritative commands such as seen in the epistles?
2. Did the early church accept the book as the word of God? There are over 36,000 quotes of scripture from the early church fathers; we can reconstruct the entire New Testament minus eleven verses. We also know that the New Testament was accepted early because they have found scriptures written on the ossuary boxes.
3. Does the book have the power of God? (2 Tim.3:15, Acts 9). Are there acts of God such as miracles seen in the book? Does the book change lives?
4. Does the book tell the truth? In other words does the truth in the book line up with the truth that was previously given by God? God will not contradict Himself (1 Tim. 6:20, Heb. 6:18, Tit.1:2).

5. Did the other authors or Apostles make reference to the book in their writings (2 Pet.3:16, 1 Tim. 5:18, Luke 10:7 or Matt.10:10)?

2. The process of canonicity.

- Old Testament

The Old Testament was written over a period of over a thousand years. We know from passages like Deuteronomy 31 and 2 Kings 22:8 that the Old Testament scriptures were accepted and gathered right away. We also know that by the time of Jesus the 22 books and the threefold division of the Tanak were already accepted and set (Luke 24:44).

In 90AD, there was a council of liberal Rabbis which met in Jamnia. These Rabbis sought to question the books of the Bible which had already been accepted for many years by the Jews.

The Rabbi's questioned five books:

1. Song of Solomon (erotic) this book was questioned because it mentioned things about the marriage bed. The Rabbis accepted it because the Bible says marriage is good.

2. Ecclesiastes (fleshly) the Rabbis accepted this book because it came to a spiritual conclusion, also Josephus includes this book in his writings.

3. Esther (no name for God). Though God's name is not mentioned, God's providence was evident. Josephus also included this book in his writings.

4. Ezekiel, this book was rejected at first because of interpretation problems, the Rabbis later accepted it book because it was found not to contradict the whole of God's revelation.

5. Proverbs (illogical) some of statements in this book seemed to be illogical. The Rabbis later accepted the books because they discovered that that their interpretation was wrong.

The end result of this council was they reaffirmed that the 22 books of the Tanak and those alone as the inspired word of God.

- New Testament

The New Testament was written over a period of 50 years (50-100AD). Just like the Old Testament the books of the New Testament were accepted and gathered very quickly. For example:

1. The people recognized that the Apostles were writing the authoritative word of God.

- Colossians 4:16 Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:27 I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.
- Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:1-5 that if someone rejected his writings then they were to withdraw from them.

2. Paul quoted Luke 10:7.

3. Peter refers to Paul's writings in 2 Peter 3:16.

Also confirming that the books of the New Testament were recognized and gathered by the second century AD we have a document that was discovered by L.A. Muratori in a library in Milan, Italy.

This document was a Latin manuscript that dated to the eighth century. The manuscript recorded some of the books which were looked at as canonical by believers by 200AD. The books mentioned on this document were: the four gospels, Acts, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 & 2 John, Jude and Revelation, also this list included the Wisdom of Solomon and the Revelation of Peter.

The only books that were missing on this list were Philemon, Hebrews, and James, 1 & 2 Peter and 3 John.

Commenting on the Wisdom of Solomon and the Revelation of Peter, Neil Lightfoot says,

“It should be stated, however, that the Muratorian Fragment accepts two other books, the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of Peter. The fragment qualifies the latter

by saying that “some of our people” do not want to have it read in church. But other books were excluded. Among these are the Shepherd of Hermes, which was not accepted because it was written, as the fragment says, “quite lately in our time in the city of Rome (140AD). It was to be read in church but not “among the prophets, whose number is settled, or among the apostles till the end of time.”

The process of the church recognizing an official canon of scripture came in response to the writings of the Gnostic Heretic Marcion. Marcion believed that the whole Old Testament was not inspired, he also believed in a god of the Old Testament and New Testament.

In the middle of the second century Marcion made a canonical list in which he included Luke, Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians, Philemon. Marcion also made a gospel called the Gospel of Marcion in which he took out anything Jewish.

The result of Marcion’s writings was the church was stirred up to produce an official canonical list.

²Origin in the third century made list of the following books. The four gospels, Acts, the thirteen epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude and Revelation.

Scholars believe that over time Origin changed his mind because in a another quote he referred to all the 27 books of the New Testament.

Eusebius made a canonical list in which he placed the four gospels, Acts, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation.

Athanasius Bishop of Alexandria and also the man that was influential in refuting Arius, in a Paschal letter in 367 recognized the 27 books of our New Testament.

In 382 the church had a synod in Rome and they agreed with Athanasius’ list. The 27 books of our New Testament became the recognized canon for the western church. Because there were no phones or email, the Eastern

² Neil R. Lightfoot. How we Got the Bible P.158.

Church or everything west of Rome would not recognize these 27 books until 397.

In 397 the leaders of the early church meet for the Synod of Carthage where the church officially recognized all 27 books of the New Testament canonical.

There were six books that the early church was unsure about letting into the canon:

1. Hebrews (author unknown). This book became widely excepted when Augustine and Jerome approved and argued for the book.
2. James (justification by works James 2:24 and Romans 4:2-5). They discovered it was an interpretation problem, James describes justification from man's point of view and Paul describes justification from God's point of view.
3. 2 Peter the writing style of first and second Peter was different. This book was later accepted because the style did not matter the content was correct.
4. 2 & 3 John (private circulation). These two books were in question because they were written to some particular group of house churches. Also John refers to himself as the elder. This book was later accepted because Peter referred to himself as an elder and private interpretation does not determine canonization.
5. Jude was questioned because he quoted the book of Enoch. This book was accepted because Paul also quoted Erastus a pagan philosopher in Acts 17. Jude and Paul quoted these people in order to make a point, not because their books were inspired.
6. Revelation (people had an interpretation problem concerning the millennium). Augustine and many others in the four century had a wrong doctrinal bias concerning the end times. They allowed the book because doctrinal bias did not determine canonization.

3. Non-canonical books.

- The Apocrypha (written in between the Old Testament and New Testament).
 - 1 & 2 Esdras
 - Tobit
 - Judith
 - Additions to Esther
 - Wisdom of Solomon
 - Ecclesiasticus
 - Baruch
 - Letter of Jeremiah
 - The prayer of Azariah
 - The song of the three men
 - Susanna
 - Bel and Dragon
 - Prayer of Manasseh
 - 1 & 2 Maccabees

Different groups number the apocrypha differently based on whether you put these books together or leave them separate.

The Catholic Church has eleven of these books in their Bible; they reject 1&2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh.

Concerning the acceptance of these books in the canon of scripture the Jews in the Old Testament and the New Testament church have always rejected these books as not inspired by God. The Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1540-1546) in response to the Protestant Reformation declared these books as the word of God.

- Protestants reject the apocrypha for the following reasons.

1. There was no, miracles, predictive prophecy, and prophets (1 Macc. 9:27, 2 Macc. 2:23, 15:38).

2. The Jews at the council at Jamnia accepted all 39 books of the Bible and rejected the apocrypha.

3. Jesus and the disciple never quote from the apocrypha (Luke 24:44).

4. Luther and the Reformers rejected the apocrypha.

5. The apocrypha contains historical errors, (Tobit 1:15, Tobit 14:5).

6. The apocrypha contains doctrinal errors. In other words these books contradict the truth previously given.

- Works atone for sin (Ecclesiasticus or Sirach 3:2-4, 30, 20:28, 35:1-4, 45:16).
- Worship of Angels (Tobit 12:12-16).
- Angels (Raphael) can mediate prayer (Tobit 12:15).
- The world was created out of pre-existing matter (Wisdom of Solomon).
- The mass (2 Macc.12:42-25).
- Purgatory or the salvation of souls after death (2 Macc.12:42-45).

- Pseudepigrapha (13 books written from 200BC.-200AD.

1. Enoch (200-63BC.)

2. Book of Jubilee (150-100BC).

3. Testament of the 12 Patriarchs (130BC.)
4. 2 Baruch (70-100BC)
5. Book of Adam and Eve (1st century AD).
6. Lives of the Prophets (1st century AD).
7. Assumption of Moses (AD 1-30).
8. Ascension of Isaiah (2nd century AD).
9. Psalms of Solomon (40BC)

Some call these 9 books the apocrypha. These books were always rejected by the Jews and the church fathers. These books have a false title and they contain false content.

There are many other false New Testament books that were rejected, sometimes called the New Testament apocrypha or the Gnostic Gospels.

Dr. Neil R. Lightfoot says the following about some of these books. "Dating from the second century and later, these books were written under assumed names: the gospel of Peter, the protoevangelium of James, the gospel of Bartholomew, the Infancy story of Thomas, the Acts of Peter, the Acts of John and on and on it goes. Such works, to say the least, present highly fanciful stories of Jesus during His early years or while He was in the tomb or after His resurrection; imaginative tales about the missionary activities of the Apostles; letters supposedly written by the Apostles and apocalypses of Peter and others that pretend to reveal the future. Here are some examples of what one may find in these books.

1. The Infancy story of Thomas: When a child bumps his shoulder, Jesus strikes him dead.
2. The gospel of Peter: Three men come out of Jesus' tomb, which a cross following them; the head of two of them reaches to heaven, the head of the other overpasses the heavens.
3. Protevangelium of James: Mary is brought up in the temple, dedicated as a virgin from the age of three.
4. Acts of John: John in finding bed bugs in his bed at an inn commands them to leave and behave themselves.
5. Acts of Paul: Paul baptizes a lion, who later spares him from death at an amphitheater in Ephesus.

These books as well as the other New Testament apocryphal books were rejected by the early church because they were written after the Apostles

and therefore the canon was closed. Secondly these books were rejected because they were not the inspired word of God but fairytales.

Before we close, I want to address some common questions which are, "Are any inspired books missing, what if they find a book written by an Apostle?"

The New Testament canon is closed; this means that there are no more inspired books besides the 66 we have in our Bible. The canon is closed for the following reason:

1. In order for a book to be considered inspired it had to be written by a prophet, an Apostle or an associate of an Apostle. The Biblical office of a prophet or Apostle ceased with the completion of the Bible and the death of the Apostles. As a result of this there can be no inspired books after 100AD.
2. Not everything the Apostles wrote was to be put in the Bible, but only that which God by His providence inspired and therefore preserved.
3. The Biblical revelation was complete with the book of Revelation which was written by the last living Apostle in the mid nineties AD. God's revelation of His redemptive plan to save man started in Genesis and was completed in Revelation.

In conclusion the 66 books no more or no less that we have in our Bible is the inspired inerrant and authoritative word of God.