

Canonicity- “Unity of the Truth”

We know that the Scriptures were written by men chosen specifically by God to do His writing. In the Old Testament, men of authority in religion and civil life were chosen to write the words. In the New Testament, Christ chose the men personally who would write what needed to be written. Before jumping into canonicity, we must remember some underlying principles. First, the Bible self-authenticates itself because the books were breathed out by God (II Tim. 3:16). This means the books of the Bible were canonical as soon as they were written because of their source. Second, man had to make the right decisions in determining which books could be included in the canon. Peter said Paul’s writings were measured and found acceptable in II Peter 3:15-16. Third, God identifies His Word as being eternally formed from Psa. 119:89.

- I. Definition: A *canon*, by definition, is literally “a measuring rod or stick”, and metaphorically “a rule or standard.” In reference to the Bible, the Canon means those books that were measured and found satisfactory as a part of the inspired Word of God (Gal. 6:16). Another meaning for the word is that these canonical books should serve as our rule of life (our standard for holy living).
- II. *Canonicity* is the study of which books are included in the Holy Scriptures, i.e., which books “measure up” to being God’s inspired Word. “The canon of Scripture was being formed as each book was written and it was complete when the last book was finished. When we speak of the formation of the canon, we actually mean the recognition of the canonical books by the church.” – Charles Ryrie.
 - A. This is accomplished because God has determined it so, and man has recognized it as inspired by God. This assumes that God has spoken to us through the prophets and that He has done it in such a way that we will understand.
 - B. Man has historically recognized the canonicity of God’s Word. This assumes that the Divine nature of the book should be obvious enough to insure its acceptance.
 - C. The Micro-canon and Macro-canon. The micro-canon determined which books were accepted as canonical (27 N.T. and 39 O.T.). The macro-canon determined what form of the books are canonical. The Old Testament is recognized by the Hebrew Masoretic texts, and the New Testament is recognized by the Greek Textus Receptus.
- III. Determining the Canon of the Old Testament
 - A. The Old Testament is full of what God had orally given to men and serves as the first evidence.
 1. The Law of Moses was claimed to be authoritative a number of times. (Joshua 1:7-8; Nehemiah 13:1).
 2. The prophets were claimed to be authoritative through comparisons of Scripture (II Chr. 36:22-23 with Ezra 1:1-4).
 3. Malachi 4:5 as the prophet stated the end of an era with the promise of a future Elijah-type prophet found in John the Baptist. (Matt. 17:11-12)
 - B. Another type of evidence comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls. There are about 175 of these scrolls that are copies of the Old Testament and include the entirety of the Old Testament canon outside of Esther. They can be used to show which of the Old Testament books were considered sacred and important. The testimony that is

represented by them give positive evidence for the canon books because of the commentaries that were written only on these ones.

- C. The testimony of the historian Josephus, the teaching house of rabbis known as Jamnia, Philo the philosopher, and almost all of the church fathers.
- D. The New Testament proof for the Old Testament
 1. There are around 250 quotations from the Old Testament found in the New Testament, and all Old Testament books are quoted except Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. (About 35 total by Christ)
 2. Matthew 5:17- Christ says that the Law and Prophets were sure to be fulfilled
 3. Matthew 21:42- Christ quotes Psalm 118:22-23
 4. Luke 24:44- Christ approved main sections of the Old Testament
 5. Luke 11:51- Christ proves the canon of the Old Testament from first to last
 6. Luke 4:16-21- Christ quoting Isaiah 61:1-2
- E. The Written Old Testament
 1. The written Old Testament technically begins in Exodus 31:18. God set the “standard” of the canon by writing the first “scriptures” Himself.
 2. Moses was clearly confirmed as God’s first prophet. He faithfully recorded God’s word to the people. (Exodus 34:27- 28) How did they know what Moses wrote was accurate? It “measured up” to what God had already written.
 3. All future revelation would be compared to that law which God revealed to Moses. (Dt. 13:1-5; Dt. 18:18; Mal. 4:4-6). How did they know what other prophets were saying was accurate? They “measured up” to what God and Moses had previously written. God used a succession of writing prophets who had the gift of prophet. These are all examples of people recognizing the authority of God’s previously written word. God’s people recognized the authority of God’s Word.

IV. Determining the Canon of the New Testament

- A. The extent of the canon has been in some question for hundreds of years, and specifically since the addition of the Apocrypha at the Council of Trent (AD 1545-63). Anyone who has read these books will find them spiritually encouraging, but they should not be regarded as on par with the 66 books. The “apocryphal” books never claimed inspiration, but rather they also looked forward to the day when the “prophet” would return with additional revelation from God.
- B. Five Questions to Help Recognize Canonicity:
 1. Is it authoritative? (The Authority Question). They looked for internal evidence that these books came with God’s authority. Phrases such as “Thus saith the Lord” were not used flippantly by the Jews or early Christians, and carried much weight. The first question focuses on where the book came from. Every book found in the Bible has its divine origin with God first, then written through human hands which proves its authority.
 2. Is it prophetic? (The Apostolicity Question). Was the book written by God’s man, or God’s prophet? Did he have apostolic authority? They recognized that the OT was produced through “holy men of God” and they looked for the same requirement to be met in the NT. The second question focuses on the human author used by God. If the author of each book could be determined as

an apostle, prophet, associate, or person used by the Lord, then the book was accepted.

3. Is it authentic? (The Agreement Question). Does the book present God's truth? Is it consistent with other recognized Scripture? This is one reason for rejecting the Apocrypha. "Apocrypha" means doubtful: because both the Jews and the early church saw these books as inconsistent with revealed truth. They therefore did not carry God's authority. The third question determines if each book tells the truth about God and man which can be readily accepted because of the consistency that all Scripture maintains.
4. Is it dynamic? (The Ability Question). Does the book possess the power of God? God's authentic word is designed to change lives, and the church expected this to be found in NT Scripture. The fourth question focuses on the power that each book must contain. If the book has divine power to change lives, which each one does, then it can be accepted.
5. Was it received, used, and preserved by the people of God? (The Acceptance Question). God's Spirit working through God's people can be expected to recognize God's Word. There may be exceptions on the individual level, but one should expect that God would ensure that Israel, and later the church, would be guided by Himself to reveal what was and was not His Word. The last question simply looks to which books the church decided to be used and accepted in the canon itself.

C. The New Testament Canon

1. Christ preapproved the New Testament in John 14:26 and John 16:13. The N.T. canon was complete when John wrote "things to come" in Revelation.
2. The early church accepted the O.T. authority because Christ and the apostles did. (John 20:30-31; I Cor. 2:13)
3. The discussion of "canonicity" began in the second century and continued into the third.
 - a. In the first century, the apostles were still around to verify the accuracy and authority of information.
 - b. The process was different than the OT, in that the early churches did not have copies of all of the other N.T. writings because they took time to circulate.
 - c. Reasons the church needed to discuss canonicity:
 - i. It was necessary due to different circumstances than the OT saints had experienced. Israel was localized; with a specified group (Levites and kings) responsible for the Scriptures. The NT church was dispersed, with no "scribes" or governing bodies. We would expect a different timeframe and context for recognizing Scripture.
 - ii. It was necessary for authority. Other letters had been written in the apostle's names and claimed apostolic authority. (2 Thess. 2:1-2)
 - iii. It was necessary to combat heresy. Some false teachers were making their own canon, excluding letters which contradicted their false teachings.

- iv. It was necessary in the face of persecution. The church was being dispersed, and Christians were being put to death for their Scriptures. What would they be willing to die for?
4. It is important to note, however, that the church did not *determine* which books were canonical, but only *recognized* those books which were canonical. Scripture is self-authenticating!

VII. Recognition of the Canon

- A. The Bible contains no record of canonization, but it acknowledges books as canonical.

John 5:39, 46-47; Luke 24:27

1. The Bible contains no revelation as to how books should be recognized or how many books should be expected.
2. God's people were (and are) dependent on the Holy Ghost to speak through these books and give divine "endorsement" of their authenticity. (Illumination!)
3. Some additional evidence indicating the acceptance of some books as "Scripture."
 - a. The prominent place of the Law in Hebrew history – it was to be re-read periodically (Dt. 31) and it was to be the basis of decisions (John. 1:8)
 - b. The New Testament witness recognized the authority of both the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures (Matt. 23:35; Luke 24:44; 2 Peter 3:16)

- B. A timeline of recognition of the NT canon:

1. @ AD 64? – Peter recognizes Paul's writings as Scripture.
2. @ AD 90 – The NT Canon is completed with the book of the Revelation.
3. @ AD 140 – Iranaeus' *list of undisputed books* included 80% of the New Testament
4. @ AD 170 – "Muratorian Canon" includes all but Peter's epistles, James, & Hebrews
5. @ AD 220 – Origen argues to add Hebrews and Jude to Iraneus' list, implying its common acceptance.
6. @ AD 340 – Athanasius lists only our present 27 NT books as "canonical" which included James, II Peter, II and III John. These books were some of the last to be recognized because of their length and content. (NOTE: Questioning does not lessen the books authority, but rather strengthens it, because it passes the tests and comes out clean.)
7. @ AD 397 – Council of Carthage was the first church council to officially discuss canonicity. Here, all 27 NT books were recognized. "Spurious manuscripts" were proliferating, making this recognition necessary. They were not voting on which books were and which books were not inspired. They were simply recognizing that God's people saw these books to be authoritative and truly God's Word. With the canon being deemed as complete, there can be no further additions to the inspired Word of God today.