

STUDY PAK 6

THE FORMATION OF THE CANON

“Canonicity refers to the normative or authoritative books inspired by God for inclusion in Holy Scripture. Canonicity is determined by God.”

~~Norman Geisler~~

I. WHAT IS THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE?

How do we know what books belong in the Bible? **WHAT IS A CANON?**

The word canon refers to _____.

The Greek word for canon originally meant “reed”. Reeds were used like rulers or yardsticks are today. The word came to be translated as rule or measure.

In reference to the Scripture, the Canon is _____

_____ Canonization was a recognition that God had inspired the writing of a book.

II. THE CANON IS DETERMINED BY GOD

It is important to recognize that church councils and leaders could not have imposed a Canon of Scripture upon the people that a strong majority of them did not already accept.

Canonicity was recognized _____

(the New Testament priesthood), then _____, and finally by _____.

God guided His priests in the gathering of the individual books of Scripture. There are historical references that indicate that this was done under the supervision of the apostles, especially John.

H. S. Miller describes the process this way:

“It is held by the great writers, ancient and modern, and by the great Church creeds and confessions, that above and beyond the common consent of the Church we have the perfect assurance of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. _____
_____ who inspired the writers in producing the New Testament
_____ and bears witness with our spirits that the Canon is correct.” *General Biblical Introduction*, p. 141.

III. THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

The Jews recognized that God inspired Prophets with messages that were inspired word for word. Often these messages were spoken but at times God inspired the prophets to write down His words. These writings were the “Holy Writings” – Scripture. These writings were committed to the Levites.

The Levites recognized three steps in the formation of the Canon.

1. Divine inspiration
2. Human recognition of divine inspiration
3. Collection of the inspired Scriptures

The Old Testament priesthood was simply trusted to recognize what God had inspired through His prophets.

Jesus endorsed the entire range of the Old Testament Scripture (Luke 11:51; Matthew 23:36)

The Canon of the Old Testament was closed when the Holy Spirit stopped inspiring prophets with new written messages. The people could clearly tell when someone was prophesying (I Samuel 10:10-13; 19:18-24).

The last five men of the Old Testament who God used to prophesy and write Scripture lived during roughly the same period of time: Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and

Malachi. After these men, prophecy ceased until the New Testament era. *First Maccabees* (100 B.C.) reports that the people were perplexed _____
_____ (I Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 4:41).

Josephus was a Jewish historian, writing just after the time of Christ. He makes the point that no new Jewish Scripture had been given since the time of Artaxexes I (465-424 B.C.). The reason was that the Jews no longer had any prophets. He also listed the canonical books of the Old Testament. _____
_____.

He pointed out that the Hebrews considered these books as sacred, and that no one dared to make any addition, subtraction or alteration to them. (*Against Apion 1:8*)

The book of *Second Maccabees* refers to Nehemiah gathering all the sacred Scriptures of the Hebrews together and putting them into one library (II Maccabees 2:13). The Jewish Talmud refers to the “great men of the synagogue” and Ezra collecting all of the sacred books and placing them into one volume.

In A.D. 70 a number of Jewish rabbis met in the Council of Jamnia. They specifically confirmed the same Old Testament books that are found in the King James Bible today.

IV. THE APOCRYPHA

The term “apocrypha” means hidden or secret. Today the term is used of fourteen books that are accepted in the official Roman Catholic Canon of the Old Testament but that have been rejected by Baptists and (until recently) by Protestants.

These books were written between the close of the Old Testament Canon and the beginning of the New Testament era. The Jews never accepted these books and never listed them as a part of the Old Testament. Christ and the apostles never quoted from or alluded to these books.

King James Bible critics often like to point out that the Apocrypha was included in early editions of the King James Bible. This is true but they were placed in a separate category between the Testaments with a note about the “Canonical and Apochryphal Books”. They were clearly identified as “Apochryphal” and not “Canonical”.

King James himself wrote, “as to the Apocriphe books, I omit them because I am no Papist (as I said before) and indeed someone of them are as like the dietement of the Spirit of God, as an Egg is to an Oyster” (*Basilikon Doron*).

VI. THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

During the New Testament era God used apostles (Mark and Luke were not apostles) to deliver the message of the New Testament, Hebrews 2:3-4; II Corinthians 12:12.

Over a thirty-five year period, God inspired the apostles to write 27 books. The original manuscripts were sent to a number of different locations. Copies began to be made and shared between churches.

From the very beginning, heretics began to write their own ideas into books and pretend that these books were written by apostles. Books like *The Gospel of Thomas*, and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* were used to advance heresy. Various sects promoted phony gospels and epistles but they had little impact on genuine believers. However, Bible believers longed to know whether they had collected all of the New Testament Scriptures.

VI. JOHN AND THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Augustine wrote that the New Testament was confirmed by the apostles (Eleventh book, *Against Faustus the Manichean*, chapter 5).

Jerome states that _____
and that he rejected any fictitious books. A false book, *The Acts of Paul and Trecla* was

presented to John but he rejected it and identified and condemned the true author. (*The Catalogue of Jerome*, first volume.)

Eusebius wrote that _____ and _____ the canonical books by 95 A.D. (Eusebius, *History of the Church*, book III, chapter 24).

Tertullian wrote that the original manuscripts of the apostles were available in his day and that copies could be compared to them. (*Prescriptions of Tertullian*, Leopold edition, prescription 3, page 25)

The New Testament Canon was established long before the official councils of the state church took place. The books of the New Testament were recognized by the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the priesthood of believers. They were collected by the apostles, particularly John. They were recognized by apostolic authority just as they were written by apostolic authority. The Latin Itala Bible, translated by 150 A.D., had every canonical book of the Old and New Testaments just as we have today.

VII. THE CHURCH COUNCILS

As the Emperor Constantine began to merge Christianity, paganism, and the Roman Empire into one state church, new issues arose.

Some genuine Christians weary of centuries of persecution, joined the state church. They struggled to make orthodox Christianity the doctrine of the state church. They attempted to battle paganism and heresy from within the state church. The first great champion of the orthodox Christians was Athanasius. He battled the Arians to make the Deity of Christ and the Trinity official doctrine.

He also campaigned to get the state church to recognize an official Canon of Scripture. He wrote, "Our whole Scripture is divinely inspired and hath books not infinite in number, but finite and comprehended in a certain canon (*Synopsis Oppositions* 2.126). In 367 A.D. he _____

_____ . He wrote, “Let no one add to these, let nothing be taken away from them” (Ibid).

Augustine chaired three church councils that dealt with the subject of the Canon, the Council of Hippo in 393 A.D. and the Councils of Carthage on 397 and 419 A.D. All came to the same conclusion. They each listed as the Canon of Scripture the exact same books that we have now in the King James Bible.

In later centuries the Roman Catholic Church would declare that it had the power to decide which books were Scripture. Protestants were quick to reject the idea that the Roman Catholic Church had authority over the Scriptures.

In 1559, John Calvin wrote (in *The French Confession*):

“We know these books to be canonical and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and _____, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we cannot found any article of faith.”

VIII. FALSE WRITINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT ERA

As soon as the New Testament writings began to be distributed, heretics began to distribute their own writings. They often falsely attributed the authorship of these writings to the apostles. The New Testament pseudepigrapha (false writings) have gained a lot of renewed attention. The books of Dan Brown (*The Da Vinci Code*, etc.) and the theories of modernist Christianity have found a great deal of support in some of the pseudepigrapha. Some eighty Gnostic writings have been published in English by Bart Ehrman in *The Lost Scriptures*.

These books were routinely rejected by early Christian leaders. They were accepted by isolated cults and heretics but never by any number of Bible believing Christians. It was

not necessary for church councils to reject these books; the New Testament priesthood had already done so!

IX. TESTS OF CANONICITY

The Jews, pagans, and Christian heretics all challenged the New Testament Canon. Unbelievers could not understand how that the Scriptures authenticated themselves in the heart of believers. Christians began to develop explanations to defend the authority of the New Testament books. These were referred to as the tests of canonicity.

The first and most basic test of canonicity was apostolic authority. God used the apostles to deliver revelation and to write down His holy writings.

Apostles may also have written books and letters that were not inspired (Paul wrote at least two other letters to the Corinthians). By the grace of God none of the uninspired writings of the apostles have survived. This prevents any confusion from trying to distinguish between inspired and uninspired writings of apostles. The New Testament is accepted based upon having been written by apostles or under the authority of an apostle. Many early Christian authors (Eusebius, Papias, Justin Martyr for example) describe Luke and Acts as being authorized by Paul and Mark as being authorized by Peter. These books were accepted upon the basis of apostolic authority.

Other tests of canonicity included: What is the subject of the book: Does it claim to be inspired? Does it have any provable errors?

The New Testament Canon has stood for 2,000 years. From the beginning, the Bible believing independent churches (Baptist) accepted the same Canon that is found in our Bible. In the early days of the state church, the orthodox believers advocated the same books found today in the King James Bible. The Protestants accepted the same books found today in our Bible.

The Scriptures were written by the Holy Spirit through human penmen. The Scriptures are preserved by the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures were collected (canonized) based upon the work of the Holy Spirit.