

Canonicity of the Bible

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: Title]** What do we mean when we say we believe in the canonicity of the Bible?
 - κανών in Greek means the standard.
 - We believe the books of the Bible have been correctly gathered and preserved into the “canon” or standard which we call the Bible, which is to say that there are no books in the Bible incorrectly included and no books outside the Bible incorrectly excluded.
- † Is there a theological basis for believing in canonicity?
 - We believe in canonicity because the Bible is inspired. We believe that, since God cared enough to inspire the content of the Bible, he would care enough to distinguish it from other writings so it could be recognized.

Old Testament

- † When was the Old Testament canon settled?
 - **[Slide 2: Moses]** The earliest canon was the one Moses wrote and collected together. Turn in your Bible to Deuteronomy 31.24-26 [NIV]: “After Moses finished writing in a book the words of this law from beginning to end, he gave this command to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD: Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you.”
 - **[Slide 3: Talmud]** The Old Testament writings were recognized as they were produced, because of the authority of the prophets and leaders who wrote them.
 - Though there were other respected writings, there had been no further additions to the Old Testament canon in over four hundred years by the time of Christ.
 - The first century Jewish writer Josephus, who lived just after Christ, gives us evidence that the Old Testament canon was settled and recognized by the time of Christ.
 - The second century Talmud included the Old Testament as we have it today.
- † **[Slide 4: RC]** There were other Jewish writings that were popular and thought to be useful, even though they were not considered scriptural.
 - Sometime in the first few centuries, the churches started including several apocryphal books as “useful” though not “scriptural.” Some of these, like 1 Maccabees, probably are accurate history though not inspired.
 - None of the apocryphal books were never declared scriptural, until the Roman church declared them so at the Council of Trent in 1546, after the Reformation had begun.
 - So we feel confident in saying that the Old Testament books were recognized as they were written, and that this canon was closed hundreds of years before Christ was born.

New Testament

- † **[Slide 5: NT?]** When and how was the New Testament canon settled?
 - We see evidence in the early church writings that the New Testament books proved their worthiness and their pedigree from the apostles, and thus were recognized by the local churches.

- † In the early church, there was a recognition of apostolic authority and thus of the authority of the apostolic writings.
 - **[Slide 6: Ephesians 2.20]** For example, turn with me to Ephesians 2.20 [NLT]: “Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.”
 - **[Slide 7: Magnesians 13.1]** The first century church leader, Ignatius, who served alongside Paul, Peter, and John, wrote *Magnesians* 13.1: “Study, therefore, to be established in the doctrines of the Lord and the apostles...” This showed the respect accorded the apostles.
 - **[Slide 8: 1 Clement 47.1-3]** Another first century church leader, Clement, wrote in his letter 1 Clement [47.1-3]: “Take up the epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul. What did he write to you at the time when the Gospel first began to be preached? Truly, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he wrote to you ...”
 - **[Slide 9: Ignatius Romans]** The early church writers even specifically said that what they wrote was not inspired scripture as what the apostles had written was. For example Ignatius wrote to the Romans [4.3]: “I do not, as Peter and Paul, issue commandments unto you. They were apostles.”
 - **[Slide 10: apostolic authority]** In all the churches, the apostles had absolute authority, and that extended to their writings. God collected into the New Testament the apostolic writings he wanted preserved for all the churches over the centuries. The early church fathers wrote about what the apostles wrote and said.

- † The New Testament books were written by the end of the first century. The local churches preserved the apostolic writings, copied them, and collected those that were distributed.
 - **[Slide 11: Colossians 4.16]** For example, turn with me to Colossians 4.16. Paul instructed the Colossians saying, “When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.”
 - The churches had widely distributed the apostolic books by the early second century.

- † By the end of the second century, most New Testament documents were almost universally regarded as scripture. Some individual scholars at first doubted the canonicity of a few New Testament documents, but these differences were worked out.
 - **[Slide 12: orthodox A]** Another issue was whether to include as canonical a few other orthodox writings. These books are in agreement with what Jesus and the apostles taught, but were not written by the apostles, and so eventually were not included in the New Testament, though many churches continued to find them useful and insightful.
 - You can see here some of these works. The Didache shows us what the early church in Rome considered important for teaching new believers and some of their ministry methods. 1 Clement is an excellent letter he wrote to the Corinthians, when trouble again developed in that church, despite the letters they had from Paul. We have seven letters Ignatius wrote as he was on his way to be executed in Rome, and these letters are great sources of insight and encouragement. Barnabas was not written by our biblical Barnabas, and I don’t like that one so much; it is not a good example of how to interpret the Bible.
 - **[Slide 13: orthodox B]** We have a letter from Polycarp to the Philippians and a historical account of his martyrdom, both of which are really encouraging writings. 2 Clement is a sermon

of encouragement, but I believe scholars now think it must have been a different Clement who wrote it. The Shepherd is a strange work of parables and bizarre visions.

- **[Slide 14: orthodox C]** And then we have the Epistle to Diognetus and fragments of the writing of Papias. I have read most of these works, and I like most of them and would read them again. These are important works from the early church, but they are not considered part of the scriptural canon, because they were not written by the apostles or their designees.
- † The churches were careful to discern what was genuine and what was not. We see that they did not include any non-apostolic writings in the canon, even if they were orthodox. There is no evidence that any non-orthodox writings were ever considered to be canonical, while we see that there is great evidence that the church leaders were careful to exclude anything that disagreed with the apostles.
- **[Slide 15: Tertullian A]** For example, Tertullian wrote, “On the whole, then, if that is evidently more true which is earlier, if that is earlier which is from the very beginning, if that is from the beginning which has the apostles for its authors, then it will certainly be quite as evident, that that comes down from the apostles, which has been kept as a sacred deposit in the churches of the apostles. [i.e. the churches valued the writings of the actual apostles, which were written soon after Christ ascended, and were collected by the churches at that time.]
 - **[Slide 16: Tertullian B]** Let us see what milk the Corinthians drank from Paul; to what rule of faith the Galatians were brought for correction; what the Philippians, the Thessalonians, the Ephesians read by it; what utterance also the Romans give, so very near (to the apostles), to whom Peter and Paul conjointly bequeathed the gospel even sealed with their own blood. We have also St. John’s foster churches. For although Marcion rejects his Apocalypse, the order of the bishops (thereof), when traced up to their origin, will yet rest on John as their author. In the same manner is recognized the excellent source of the other churches. [So here he is listing books he knows to be apostolic and therefore scriptural: the letters of Paul, the writings of John.]
 - **[Slide 17: Tertullian C]** I say, therefore, that in them (and not simply such of them as were founded by apostles, but in all those which are united with them in the fellowship of the mystery of the gospel of Christ) that Gospel of Luke which we are defending with all our might has stood its ground from its very first publication. The same authority of the apostolic churches will afford evidence to the other Gospels also which we possess equally through their means, and according to their usage – I mean the Gospels of John and Matthew—whilst that which Mark published may be affirmed to be Peter’s whose interpreter Mark was. For even Luke’s form of the Gospel men usually ascribe to Paul. . . . [So here is lists as apostolic and scriptural the four gospels.]
 - **[Slide 18: Tertullian D]** Such are the summary arguments which we use, when we take up arms against heretics for the faith of the gospel, maintaining both that order of periods, which rules that a late date is the mark of forgers, and that authority of churches which lends support to the tradition of the apostles; because truth must needs precede the forgery, and proceed straight from those by whom it has been handed on.” [i.e. any writing that came later than the apostles or contradicts the writings of the apostles is considered to not be scriptural.]
- † **[Slide 19: heresy A]** There is ample evidence from other sources as well that the early church considered and rejected texts which did not prove trustworthy, either because of inconsistencies with acknowledged biblical scripture or because they were produced centuries later by people not on a first-hand basis with what Jesus taught.
- **[Slide 20: heresy B]** These rejected texts include such supposed gospels as those of Thomas, Judas, and Mary Magdalene. These texts generally put forth a theology called Gnosticism, which took aspects of Christian thought but twisted them with Greek pagan concepts, and were written later than biblical scripture.

- Such theology was consistently rebuked and rejected by empire-wide gatherings of church leaders in the first few centuries after Christ, such as at the Council of Laodicea, the Council of Rome, and the Synod of Hippo.
 - **[Slide 21: chart]** Here is the thing to remember about these works today. For New Testament documents, believing scholars have provided lots of evidence for believing in their authenticity while critical scholars express some doubts about some of them. But for these later non-apostolic documents, nobody is claiming they are authentic representations of writings by the apostles. So there is no reason to believe them, and we can pity groups that are now teaching them in their churches, like the Unitarians.
- † **[Slide 22: Eusebius A]** By the fourth century, church historian Eusebius could include all the correct books of the New Testament except Revelation, with no incorrect books, though he admitted some scholars had questions still about five of the smaller epistles.
- 1. Since we are dealing with this subject it is proper to sum up the writings of the New Testament which have been already mentioned. First then must be put the holy quaternion of the Gospels; following them the Acts of the Apostles. 2. After this must be reckoned the epistles of Paul;
 - **[Slide 23: Eusebius B]** next in order the extant former epistle of John, and likewise the epistle of Peter, must be maintained. After them is to be placed, if it really seem proper, the Apocalypse of John, concerning which we shall give the different opinions at the proper time. These then belong among the accepted writings. 3. Among the disputed writings, which are nevertheless recognized by many, are extant the so-called epistle of James and that of Jude, also the second epistle of Peter, and those that are called the second and third of John, whether they belong to the evangelist or to another person of the same name.
 - **[Slide 24: Eusebius C]** 4. Among the rejected writings must be reckoned also the Acts of Paul, and the so-called Shepherd, and the Apocalypse of Peter, and in addition to these the extant epistle of Barnabas, and the so-called Teachings of the Apostles; and besides, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books. 5. And among these some have placed also the Gospel according to the Hebrews, with which those of the Hebrews that have accepted Christ are especially delighted. And all these may be reckoned among the disputed books.
 - **[Slide 25: Athanasius]** The same century, the Council of Laodicea had the canon all correct except for omitting Revelation. The council of Rome had it all correct, as did the synod of Hippo. Also, respected theologian Athanasius had it all correct, including Revelation, but wondered about three other orthodox works which we understand are not inspired: Shepherd of Hermes, Didache, and Wisdom of Solomon.
- † In summary, most of the New Testament was recognized immediately and consistently by the churches. Some of the New Testament was recognized by its original audience, but debated elsewhere for a time, until fully recognized by the fourth century. Some other orthodox writings were discussed but not included as scripture. No unorthodox writings were ever included.
- † Liberal Scholars like Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels will argue there were multiple Christianities and the winners wrote the history books, but we have the historical evidence of hundreds of church writings from all over the Roman Empire, which tell the true story of one Christianity that collected the books from the apostles while continually putting down heretical works that tried to infiltrate.

Conclusion