

Liberty Theological Seminary

Research Paper

The Canon of the New Testament

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INTRODUCTION

As most evangelical Christians base their beliefs on the authority of Scripture, it should quickly become apparent that the contemporary Christian must develop a foundational understanding about how and why the New Testament has come to be. As this was indeed a much-debated topic among church fathers and their heretical counterparts, the writings of the fathers are invaluable guides in following the evolving process of recognizing the New Testament canon as it stands today. By examining the formation of the New Testament canon this paper will demonstrate that the New Testament writings were thoroughly critiqued and recognized as being elevated above all others, thus proving trustworthy and complete.

SETTING THE STANDARD

Canon is derived from the Greek *kanon*, which originally referred to a *reed* that was used to test for straightness or length. *Canon* later evolved to mean “standard”, “rule”, or “norm”.¹ By the fourth century it was used to describe the books we now recognize as the Old and New Testament. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, is the first writer known to have used ‘*canon*’ in this way.² Today the ‘*canon*’ is recognized as “the closed collection of documents that constitute authoritative scripture.”³ But the student must press further to appreciate the process that the early church went through as they wrestled with many writings that were ultimately excluded from the New Testament.

¹ Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 70.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 77.

³ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 726.

A major misunderstanding among many people is that the Church formed a council and simply picked the books they wanted as part of the Bible. But this is a misstep that fails to distinguish the difference between *determination* and *recognition* of canonicity.⁴ J. I. Packer notes,

The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by His work of creation, and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up.⁵

It is therefore incorrect to view the church *over* the canon. In fact, the early fathers clearly believed the church was *under* the canon.⁶ Thus, while the church did not *determine* canonicity, the church *recognized the divine origin* of the canon by compiling the twenty-seven New Testament writings to the exclusion of many others that did not fit the criteria for being ‘God-breathed’. By the second half of the second century, clear evidence of the concept of a canon appears, although not all the books now included in the Canon were decided upon in any one church.⁷

⁴ Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Rev. and expanded. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 211.

⁵ J.I. Packer, *God Speaks to Man*, (Westminster Press 1965), 81.

⁶ Louis Gaussen, *Theopneustia*, (General Books LLC, 2009) 137.)

⁷ D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 172.

NECESSITY OF THE CANON

Two Threatening Dilemmas: Heresy and Persecution

Two threatening dilemmas, heretical influence and Roman persecution, led the Church to produce a clearly defined canon. First, the rise of Gnostic teachers (e.g. Valentinus) challenged the Church to clarify how the Bible should be rightly *interpreted*. Other heretical works led the early church fathers to answer how the Bible should be correctly *identified*. Marcion's canon (A.D. 140) excludes Matthew, Mark, and John. Even Luke, his only recognized Gospel, was purged of elements that were inconsistent with Marcion's beliefs.⁸ Consequently, he mutilated Luke by removing all references to Jesus' birth, genealogy, or Jewishness, which he attributed to manipulating editors (i.e. Jewish scribes). The irony is that Marcion was guilty of doing the same thing he accused Judaizers of doing. While he recognized ten of Paul's letters (minus the Pastorals), he further abbreviated these apostolic documents, as he believed that an alien hand had corrupted the authentic Pauline teaching.⁹ Thus Marcion's canon sounded an alarm for the young Church. Without a recognized canon it would be easy for future heretical claims to go unchecked, thus establishing the need for an authoritative list.

The second great dilemma faced by the early church was that of Roman persecution. While the Church had been persecuted in various ways and various locations since the days of Nero, it was the imperial edict of Diocletian that required all copies of Christian Scripture be confiscated and destroyed (February 23, AD 303). This brought the necessity for canon clarity to the forefront. Christians needed to know what writings were inspired by God and thus were

⁸ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 137.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

worth dying for. This focused believers on “the vital role of the scriptures in Christian life and worship”.¹⁰ Thus the Church attempted to answer the fundamental question: What is the Bible?

Countering Heresy

Without an approved canonical list, different churches valued certain Gospels and Epistles over others. “But Marcion’s list required a response”, and a gradual consensus began to develop among orthodox Christians.¹¹ Thus by the end of the second century the core of the New Testament canon was established with the recognition of the four Gospels, Acts, and the thirteen Pauline epistles (minus the debatable presumption of Hebrews as Pauline).¹² It is believed that the Muratorian Fragment comes from this time period as it specifically refers to writings that were “forged in accordance with Marcion’s heresy”. This list demonstrates the strong contrast between Gnostic writings and Scripture, saying “it is not fitting that poison should be mixed with honey”.¹³ The Muratorian list (A.D. 170) reflected a canon much like ours with a few exceptions.¹⁴ This included twenty-one of twenty-seven New Testament writings recognized today. Significantly, Acts is included in the Muratorian list. In contrast to Marcion’s concept of the uniquely faithful apostle Paul, Bruce points out that the book of Acts played a vital role in the New Testament canon calling it “the hinge of the New Testament collection”.¹⁵ Instead of

¹⁰ Ibid., 216.

¹¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity. Volume I: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*. (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1984), 62.

¹² Ibid., 63.

¹³ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 160.

¹⁴ This list includes an Epistle to the Laodiceans, another to the Alexandrians, and the apocalypse of Peter. It omits one of John’s three epistles.

¹⁵ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 152.

depending on one faithful apostle, the book of Acts demonstrates that the universal message of Christianity is modeled in both the Hebrew leadership of Peter, Paul, and James as well as the Hellenistic leaders like Stephen and Phillip. Thus, as the Muratorian list demonstrates, the four Gospels, Acts, and the thirteen writings of Paul were virtually unquestioned among the early church fathers.

Getting the Word Out

As the gospel rapidly spread to other communities and countries there was a need to translate the Scriptures into other languages like Syriac and Old Latin.¹⁶ Without a clearly defined canon it would be impossible to know which writings to include in these crucial translations for the fledgling churches. Further, as the apostles had passed into eternity and could no longer be questioned face to face, “the emphasis naturally shifted to the written record of their instruction, the Gospels and letters (epistles) they left behind”.¹⁷

CRITERIA FOR CANONIZATION

The early Christians didn’t have the New Testament in a combined codex form, as the separate writings were still yet to be compiled and distributed. They did have the Old Testament, oral teaching about Jesus, and direct revelation from God through Christian prophets (cf. Acts 21:10-14). As the Gospels and Pauline writings began to circulate, early Christians began to prize these papyrus messages. When the codex form (writings bound more like modern books, developed towards the end of the first century) became available, Christians quickly adopted it to

¹⁶ Geisler and Nix, 278.

¹⁷ Greg Koukl, “The Da Vinci Code Cracks” *Solid Ground* (May/June 2006): 5.

replace the scroll. In this form, there is early evidence “of our twenty seven New Testament documents being bound together in various configurations”.¹⁸ The four canonical gospels were being circulated together by the middle of the second century and it is generally accepted that the Pauline epistles were circulating before the gospels.¹⁹ Within the next several years the followers of Jesus produced and used many writings outside today’s recognized New Testament canon.²⁰ Because of this, it became important for the church to sift through these documents to determine authenticity. While several determining factors are mentioned among different authors, the primary tests were those of orthodoxy, apostolicity, and universality.

Orthodoxy

The writing must teach principles that the church regarded as correct. Because of “the rule of faith”, heretical writings were quickly jettisoned from the concept of inclusion in the canon. Paul wrote, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (Galatians 1:8 NIV) Thus writings that stood in opposition to the clear teaching of the apostles were condemned as well. In this way, orthodoxy is closely linked with the next test, *apostolicity*.

¹⁸ Carson and Moo, 734.

¹⁹ Ibid, 739.

²⁰ Lea and Black, 72.

Apostolicity

Apostolicity is certainly one of the most important criteria of recognizing canonical writings. This means, “each book has either apostolic *authorship* or apostolic *teaching*. And in either case it possesses apostolic authority.”²¹ Eyewitness testimony is essential to authenticate the incredible claims made by Jesus and his followers in the New Testament. To pass the test of apostolicity, the document must be written by apostles or those who had immediate contact with them (e.g. Mark, Luke). As opposed to the Pseudepigrapha writings, “there is good evidence that all twenty-seven books of the New Testament come from the apostles and their associates.”²²

Universality

“When a book was received, collected, read, and used by the people of God as the Word of God, it was regarded as canonical.”²³ Thus the writing must be “accepted by a broad geographic segment of the church.”²⁴ Considering the cultural diversities within the churches, their agreement of which books belonged in the New Testament canon “serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level.”²⁵ Only the Holy Spirit could lead people from different cultures to universally receive the *same writings* as canonical.

²¹ Geisler and Nix, 212.

²² Ibid., 213.

²³ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 22.

²⁴ Lea and Black, 71.

²⁵ Carson and Moo, 736

UNIVERSAL RECOGNITION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

The early church fathers cited the canonical New Testament documents much more frequently than other writings (now considered non-canonical) circulating during the time.²⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 260-340), who built on the foundation of church fathers Clement and Origen, divided writings into three classes:

1. *Recognized Books* (four gospels, Acts, fourteen Pauline epistles, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation)
2. *Disputed Books*
 - a. Generally Accepted (James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John)
 - b. Unacceptable (Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache)
3. *Heretical Books* (Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Thomas, Acts of Andrew, Acts of John, and other similar writings)

Further, many ecclesiastical councils and writings help the contemporary Christian to see how thorough the process of canon recognition was. *The Cheltenham Manuscript* (believed to represent North African views in A.D. 360) recognizes all New Testament writings with the exception of Hebrews, James, and Jude.²⁷ *The Festal Letter of Athanasius* (A.D. 367), a prescribed canon to the Alexandrian church, is the first document that contains the complete twenty-seven writings of the New Testament alone. *The Sixtieth Canon of the Council of Laodicea* (A.D. 363) includes all twenty-seven books with the exception of Revelation. *The Codex Sinaiticus* (fourth century) contains the entire New Testament (including the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas) and part of the Old Testament. When at last a Church Council, *the Synod of Hippo* (A.D. 393), listed the 27 books of the New Testament, “it did not confer upon them any authority

²⁶ Ibid., 733.

²⁷ Ibid., 734.

which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.”²⁸ *The Third Council of Carthage* (A.D. 397), attended by Augustine, recognized the full New Testament that we recognize today, with little deviation from that time forward.²⁹ Of particular important is the fact that the New Testament canon was not determined by any one Church Council.

IS THE CANON CLOSED?

Most who visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. will be humbled by what they see and hear. One of the most intriguing aspects is listening to the stories of holocaust survivors, eyewitnesses of that awful time. Thanks to technology the audience can visualize some of these atrocities in pictures and movies for themselves, as so become eyewitnesses to the events of World War II. Without the use of this technology, and knowing that some news agencies slant stories to fit their agenda, most choose to listen to eyewitness testimony rather than someone who might attempt to rewrite history. In the same way, today there are many attempts to reconstruct history by those who don't like where the historical evidence points them. Two thousand years after the historical Jesus, it is dangerous to receive fresh “revelation” from a contemporary writer - knowing that he has not been an eyewitness to Jesus’ life or the first century church. It is this idea of an open canon that leads many into the cultic ideologies. An open canon could and has produced “an unending stream of revelations about Jesus” that detach themselves from the Jesus of history.³⁰ Many within the first century church died to proclaim the

²⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The Books and The Parchments*, Rev. ed. (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1963), 112-113.

²⁹ Carson and Moo, 735.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 736.

message of the historical Jesus to the next generation. There is much less risk and much more reward when we rely upon the eyewitnesses of Jesus rather than contemporary pseudo scholars who change their theories with the wind. Is the biblical canon closed? “To this one should respond that the canon is closed *theologically* and *historically*, and is open only *hypothetically*.”³¹

CONCLUSION

It is clear that no one church or council decided on the New Testament canon. Foakes-Jackson makes the interesting observation that, “The Church assuredly did not make the New Testament; the two grew up together.”³² That multiple churches could agree on anything is miraculous by itself, but the agreement upon the New Testament canon could only be brought out by humble hearts led by the Holy Spirit. It is clear that “the authority of the Scriptures is not founded, then, on the authority of the Church: It is the Church that is founded on the authority of the Scriptures.”³³ These Scriptures are therefore trustworthy and complete, the primary authority of the Church until Jesus returns for His people.

³¹ Norman and Nix, 217.

³² F. John Foakes Jackson. *A History of Church History*. (Cambridge, England: W. Heffer and Sons, 1939), 21.

³³ Geisler and Nix, 222.

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