

Bibliology - Canonicity: How do we know what belongs in the Bible? 10/19/25

A. Introduction

Why these 66 books? What about “all the other books”? The Apocrypha? Pseudepigrapha? The Gospels of Thomas, Peter, and Judas? Why didn’t they make it in? Says who?

People told me things like, “Yeah, a bunch of guys in the fourth century got together and decided what to include and exclude from the Bible. You can’t really trust it.” I didn’t know what to think.

Recently we began a series addressing fundamental questions surrounding the Bible. These questions concern the topic of bibliology.

First, we studied the topic of revelation, answering the question, “What is the Bible?” From there, we looked at inspiration, answering the question, “Where did the Bible come from?”

Then, we observed the logical conclusion, namely, that the 66 books of the Bible are the inerrant and infallible words of God. Today’s post will address the canonicity of the Bible.

The question of canonicity addresses what documents belong in the Bible and why.

The “canon” refers to the books that are contained within the Bible; those which are the word of God:

- How do we know which books belong in the Bible?
- How do we know that these 66 books are the correct ones?
- How do we know we’re not missing something? And who decided what would be included in the Bible and what would not?

Some have called the issue of canonicity the “Achilles heel” of Christianity. It’s often the point of attack from unbelievers. At some point, most Christians will be challenged here.

Related, Roman Catholic proponents take issue with canonicity. They propose that holding to the canonicity of the 66 books of Scripture alone is “blind faith,”

irrational, opposed to evidence, and arbitrary. But nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, an honest study of biblical canonicity will only build one's necessary faith in the integrity of the God-breathed 66-books of the Bible.

A popular myth needs correction from the outset:

- No men, church council, or spiritual leaders ever gathered to collectively determine what would and would not be included in the Bible.
- No council decided which books to keep and toss. No human being defined the list of biblical books. And that does not make the biblical canon less reliable, but more.

B. Canonicity: A Theological Issue

The Old Testament

1. Genesis 2. Exodus 3. Leviticus 4. Numbers 5. Deuteronomy 6. Joshua 7. Judges 8. Ruth 9. 1 Samuel 10. 2 Samuel 11. 1 Kings 12. 2 Kings 13. 1 Chronicles 14. 2 Chronicles 15. Ezra 16. Nehemiah 17. Esther 18. Job 19. Psalms 20. Proverbs 21. Ecclesiastes 22. Song of Solomon 23. Isaiah 24. Jeremiah 25. Lamentations 26. Ezekiel 27. Daniel 28. Hosea 29. Joel 30. Amos 31. Obadiah 32. Jonah 33. Micah 34. Nahum 35. Habakkuk 36. Zephaniah 37. Haggai 38. Zechariah 39. Malachi

The New Testament

1. Matthew 2. Mark 3. Luke 4. John 5. Acts (of the Apostles) 6. Romans 7. 1 Corinthians 8. 2 Corinthians 9. Galatians 10. Ephesians 11. Philippians 12. Colossians 13. 1 Thessalonians 14. 2 Thessalonians 15. 1 Timothy 16. 2 Timothy 17. Titus 18. Philemon 19. Hebrews 20. James 21. 1 Peter 22. 2 Peter 23. 1 John 24. 2 John 25. 3 John 26. Jude 27. Revelation

The canon debate is primarily a theological issue, not a historical one. What should, and should not, be in the Bible is a matter of inspiration and revelation, not church councils and magisterium.

The question of the canon begins with understanding the nature of Scripture. We cannot understand what should be in the Bible until we understand what the Bible is. The canon of Scripture depends on the attributes of Scripture.

A document must have certain attributes before it can be considered as canon.

It's the same way, for example, in professional baseball. Who gets to play major league baseball is determined by who possesses certain attributes necessary to the

sport. So it is with what is, and is not, in the Bible. That's why our discussion of canon began with a study of revelation and inspiration.

C. Canonicity is the Consequence of Inspiration

Scripture is special revelation from God. It is otherwise undisclosed to, and unattainable by, man; that is, until God reveals.

Humanity received God's revelation through the act of verbal plenary inspiration, whereby God the Holy Spirit superintended the human authors to write exactly what he wished upon the original manuscripts.

The result was the 66 books of God-breathed revelation. Since God is a God of truth, these 66 books are without error. They are truth. That directs our understanding of what must be in the Bible; what constitutes the word of God.

Canonicity of the biblical text is the necessary consequence of the Holy Spirit's work of verbal plenary inspiration.

Whatever God inspired is consequently canonical. Because God gave revelation, it is thereby the word of God, or, canonical. Thus, the canonicity of a document depends entirely on the source and nature of the document, and not the outside opinion of man. Is the document the product of verbal plenary inspiration? If so, it is canonical.

As observed in the previous few posts, the 66 books are God-breathed special revelation. So then, they are canonical by God's doing, not man's determination. The Bible is canonical whether or not anyone recognizes or acknowledges it. Inspiration establishes canonicity. The construction of the canon was the act of God, independent of man: God inspired the books of Scripture. In doing so, the canon was created.

D. A Flawed Approach to Canonicity

So, how does imperfect man recognize what is and is not inspired and canonical? The question has now changed from, "How was the canon formed, historically?", to, "How can we, as Christians, *know* that these books are the right ones?"

The Roman Catholic religion takes a flawed approach to this question. Rome teaches that the canon exists because the church has infallibly decreed which books are Scripture. Thus, the magisterium determines the canon absolutely.

The authority to do so lies, they teach, in who the pope is. For Rome, the pope is the successor of the apostle Peter, vicar of Christ, and head of the church. Thus, the

authority to pronounce canonicity is vested uniquely by the pope and by the bishops who assume that they are in communion with the correct and true teachings of the faith. Add to that, when Rome speaks *ex cathedra*, she claims to speak infallibly. So, in her eyes, Rome does more than recognize canonicity; she determines it.

Though this is a flawed approach, Rome does get one thing right: the response of the church matters. We should care what the church has historically believed. However, by her numerous aberrant teachings, including denial of the true gospel and Christ as head of the church, Rome declares herself a false church (cf. Gal. 1:8-9). This has been the position of the true church, historically.

Rome undermines the authority of Scripture by teaching that canonicity is determined by the magisterium. In effect then, the authority of Scripture is beneath the authority of Rome. Though she teaches that God's authority is vested in the magisterium, legitimizing her canonical determination, this must be rejected on the grounds that Rome has deviated from the true church. Thus, Rome's say on the canon cannot be considered.

E. Man Recognizes the Canon, But Does Not Determine It

God himself is the highest authority as to the nature of his word. Men and magisteria are not God. Therefore, they are not instrumental in determining canonicity.

Since God is the highest authority, he is the one who testifies to the authenticity of his word. Since Scripture is the word of God, it is the highest authority, and thus alone qualified to declare its own canonicity. Scripture is self-authenticating in that sense.

If we assume to use anything outside of the canon (e.g. church council, magisterium, men) as determinative of what is and is not the canon, then we have wrongfully put that thing in authority over God. But God and his word are the highest authority. The thing of highest authority must adjudicate what is and is not the canon. This means that God determines what is God's word and is not. The canon itself must be self-authenticating. Certain Bible passages clue us to this fact:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way, he is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers (John 10:1-5).

The true sheep know the voice of the shepherd.

The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, "How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me. But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:24-28).

The voice of the Shepherd is authoritative, powerful, and effective. His voice is recognized by those who know him.



The sheep do not need external authentication to discern the Shepherd's voice. They only need his voice to discern his voice.

We might think of it this way: what is the best way to recognize your spouse's voice in a sea of people? To have someone you don't know tell you, "This is your spouse's voice"? To read a document that explains what your spouse's voice sounds like? The best way to discern your spouse's voice amongst other voices is to hear your spouse's voice.

Similarly, the best way to discern God's word is to hear God's word. By nature of being the Chief Shepherd's sheep, he assures that they are able, and will, hear his voice.

His voice is Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17, Heb. 1:1-2). Again, Scripture is self-authenticating. The canon declares itself canonical.

F. Missing Pieces to the Canon?

Is it possible, however, that the canon is incomplete? What if we found another letter by an Apostle and we could verify that it was genuine? After all, 2 Kings 22 demonstrates

that the Bible has been lost before, so, parts of it could be lost now, right? Should we expect to find new books which belong in the canon?

Presupposing God's care for the church, it's reasonable to affirm that he would not likely inspire a book/letter, then forget or neglect to bring it into the hands of his church.

Anything that has been lost for 2000 years was not intended by God to be foundational for the edification of the church. We would simply recognize that God did not intend for it to be a permanent foundation for the church, so we could not add it to the canon. Canonical books cannot be lost.

In the case of 2 Kings 22, the book of the law wasn't really "lost", it was neglected. The Bible was in the Temple, yet sinfully abandoned due to Israel's apostasy. Certain letters during the first century have been lost, but we have no record of them ever being considered part of Scripture. In such cases, they were lost in God's providence because they were not canonical. God is that good to outfit his church with his word.

G. Canonicity & the Divine Quality of Scripture

Though there is no higher authority for determining the canon than the canon itself, we can observe criteria inherent to biblical canonicity.

The divine qualities present in Scripture testify to its canonicity. John Calvin wrote, "It is easy to see that the sacred Scriptures, which so far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavor, breathe something divine" (*Institutes*, 1.8.1. p. 82). Again, "Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste" (*Institutes*, 1.8.1. p. 76).

Which divine qualities of Scripture testify to its canonicity?

1. First, Scripture has an unmatched **excellency** to it.

"The law of the Lord is perfect" (Ps. 19:7).

"How sweet are your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Ps. 119:103).

"Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul observes them" (Ps. 119:129).

2. Second, Scripture possesses **unique power**.

"[T]he word of God is living and active; sharper than any two-edged sword...able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

Scripture has the power to:

- 1) expose sin and guilt (2 Kings 22:11-13, Acts 2:34-37, Heb. 4:12-13)
- 2) give joy to the heart (Neh. 8:8-12, Ps. 119:111)
- 3) bring wisdom (Ps. 119:98, 2 Tim. 3:16)
- 4) give understanding (Ps. 119:144)
- 5) comfort (Ps 119:50)
- 6) convert the unconverted (Ps.19:7, Jas. 1:18, 1 Pet. 1:23)
- 7) and sanctify the converted (John 17:17, 1 Pet. 2:2).

3. Third, Scripture possesses extraordinary **unity**.

God cannot lie (Ps 89:35, Titus 1:2) or change (Heb. 13:8), so his word must confirm itself (consistent and never contradicting).

Despite 66 separate books, inspired through 40 different authors from varying demographics, over a time span of at least 1500 years, the Bible tells one cohesive story of God's redemptive plan.

These divine qualities speak to the divine origin of Scripture, and its canonicity.

H. Canonicity & the Apostolic Role

Canonicity is also observed in the role that the apostles played as human instruments in inspiration. Apostles were commissioned by the authority of Christ and entrusted with delivering the gospel to the world.

The Holy Spirit guided them into truth, empowering them to testify inerrantly in Scripture (John 14:26, 15:26-27, 16:13).

I. Canonicity & the Church's Embracing of the Canon

Since the Shepherd's voice is unmistakably discernable by his sheep, it follows that there will be a visible embracing of the canon in church history.

This is exactly what is observed. That the true church—regenerate people through faith in the biblical Christ—recognize and affirm the canon testifies to the self-authenticating nature of Scripture.

The church is *not* authoritatively determining which books belong in the canon. Jesus said that the church consists of sheep who hear, not Shepherds who determine.

- The church is more like a thermometer than a thermostat. They both tell you something about the temperature of the room.

But one *determines* the temperature while the other *responds* to it.

In the same way, the church does not *determine* the canon, it *responds* to it. As the canon developed, the church heard her Shepherd's voice, and has unanimously recognized the canon.

But what about all those disagreements over what should and should not be in the Bible? Why would God allow specious books to confuse the church?

First, there are relatively few disagreements historically. Even more, the disagreements are a commentary on sinful man and the deception of Satan.

But also, in the providence of God, the counterfeit books were a blessing to the early church. They forced the church to hear the Shepherd's voice. God's people had to clarify what God has already done, namely, canonize his verbal plenary inspired word.

J. Regeneration Essential to Recognition

Regeneration is essential to properly ascertain God's word as God's word.

Only Holy-Spirit-indwelt people are able to recognize the canon. In regeneration, sinners are awakened to discern the things of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14-16); what would otherwise be "foolishness" to unregenerate man.

Thus, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is the means by which we perceive canonicity. This becomes the test of canonicity: the Holy Spirit's testimony to the canonical nature of his own word.

The Spirit overcomes the effects of sin and produces belief within us consequent of regeneration/the new birth. The Holy Spirit opens eyes to perceive objective qualities that are present in the text.

Consequently, the true church recognizes the canon.

K. God's Sovereignty & the Canon

God is the living God; active and sovereignly involved in life.

He wishes for his people to discern what he has made canonical. God intends for his word to be known by his people (Rom. 15:4, 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

More than intention, God is sovereign in accomplishing his purposes (Ps. 135:6, Dan. 4:35, Acts 17:25-28, Eph. 1:11^L, Heb. 1:3). He will not fail to accomplish what he wishes (Ps. 115:3).

Therefore, he will certainly both produce the canon and ensure that his people correctly recognize it. God is our Shepherd and we do not lack.

How did, and does, God do that? God providentially guided the true church to recognize what he had inspired.

The recognition of the canon was the act of God, through regenerate man: God illumined regenerate individuals by the Holy Spirit to recognize what he had inspired.

In doing so, the canon was recognized.

L. A Brief History of Canon Recognition

Old Testament

Jesus affirmed the first-century Jewish canon, which is identical to our Old Testament canon.

The New Testament contains no hint that the Jews had an incorrect canon. The subject of canon is never under dispute as far as the Old Testament is concerned.

Jesus, Paul, Peter, Apollos, and Stephen, for example, appeal to the Old Testament as canonical.

Further, Jesus endorses the three-fold structure of the Old Testament that the Jews observed (the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms; Luke 24:44).

New Testament

By the close of the first century, God had completed the canon. The church immediately recognized the canonical character of New Testament letters (2 Pet. 3:16).

As time passed, the greater church heard her Shepherd's voice.

Between A.D. 70-170, the authority of the apostles was considered equal to the Old Testament.

The gospels and Paul's letters were accepted as part of the canon. It seems that every New Testament book except for 2 Peter was recognized.

Due to geographical separation, difficulty communicating in the ancient world, persecution, and Satanic opposition, we would expect recognition of the 27 books to take time.

Over the next few centuries, there was little debate over the New Testament canon. All 27 books were recognized as the word of God.

During the fourth century, Athanasius completed the task started by Eusebius with recognizing the canon.

Codex Sinaiticus existed, which contained all 27 books of the NT, indicating widespread recognition of the canon.

That we know of, the Council of Laodicea (363 AD) became the earliest council to recognize the canon (not determine it).

M. Summary

- The divine qualities of Scripture, the apostolic involvement in inspiration, and the church's embracing of the canon speak volumes as to the canonical nature of the Bible.
- Each of the attributes implies the other two attributes.
- If a book bears divine qualities, it follows that it contains apostolic teaching, which implies that the church should properly recognize it by the power of the Spirit.
- And, if the church receives it, then that implies that the book contains divine qualities and that it contains apostolic teaching. In other words, the 66 books of Scripture declare objectively their own canonicity.
- So, what council determined what would be in the bible?

- Because of God's act of inspiration, the only council which determined what would be in the canon and what would not, was the counsel of God. God inspired the canon by his Holy Spirit. In God's providence, regenerate man recognizes the canon by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

N. Is the Canon Closed?

We can discern the answer to this question by observing characteristics about the Old and New Testaments.

The OT concludes, leaves us wondering what is next.

The NT concludes, leaves us at praising God.

Where is the Seed (Gen 3:15) who will crush the serpent? Who's the one to reign forever on the throne of David?

Is mankind doomed to repeat an endless cycle of animal sacrifices for all eternity?

It leaves mankind looking forward to more, to expect the arrival of the Messiah at some point.

But the NT leaves us only looking forward to the triumphant return of Christ.

The New Testament is God's final word:

- Jesus is the final and complete revelation of God.
- *Only the Apostles were commissioned to authoritatively testify about Christ. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Heb. 1:1-2).*
- God's redemptive story is complete. Revelation is the perfect ending. In it, God ties up the "loose ends" from Genesis on.

The early church believed the canon was closed:

The Muratorian fragment rejected the popular work "Shepherd of Hermas" because it was written "very recently, in our own times."

As early as the second century, the church did not consider the canon to be open. The early church recognized the close of the canon with the death of the Apostles.

When was it closed?

- God closed the canon with the conclusion of inspiration.
- The cessation of inspiration closes the canon.

O. Bonus: What about the Apocrypha?

The Apocrypha is a collection of books and writings that were written during the intertestamental period. Rome considers them canonical.

However, as Wayne Grudem wrote, "It was not until 1546, at the Council of Trent, that the Roman Catholic Church officially declared the Apocrypha to be part of the canon (with the exception of 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh)" (*Systematic Theology*, 59).

Even so, the church does not consider them to be Scripture. Why?

- The first-century Jews did not consider them inspired.
- The New Testament never affirms or cites the Apocrypha as Scripture.
- The dominant position of the early church was that these writings were not authoritative.
- The testimony of the Holy Spirit from within the regenerate/church, has universally concluded that the Apocrypha is not inspired/God-breathed.