





# Canon: Which Books Belong?

## Lesson Five: The Necessity of Canon

1. ☞ The fact of inspiration and its manner of revelation to man has been fully established. There is no doubt that God desired that the divine wisdom be revealed to man and that God used words in making this revelation.
  - a. ☞ But the established facts about inspiration are insufficient to identify which books are “God-breathed.”
  - b. Many religious books have been written during the years in which the Old Testament and New Testament were composed. How are we to decide which of these religious books are the product of Inspiration and which are the product of mortality?
  - c. ☞ This is where the question of Canonicity applies. The basic meaning of this term refers to a standard or measuring rod. When used in reference to the Bible it means a list or index of books that are recognized as “Holy Scriptures.”
  - d. ☞ There are several significant points associated with the Canon. These points must be understood as we begin a closer examination of the topic.
    - 1) ☞ Canonicity is inseparably linked with Inspiration—the Holy Scriptures must contain only “inspired” texts (2 Timothy 3:16a). Writings that are not “inspired” have no place in the Canon.
    - 2) ☞ Canonicity is not decided by human votes. A book is canonical IF it is inspired; if its intrinsic qualities evidence divine revelation.
    - 3) ☞ Canonicity is determined by the book’s authority. It is not determined by the acceptance or rejection by man (this is illustrated well by Luther’s attitude toward the Book of James—“a right strawy book”). A book has authority if it comes from God (1 Corinthians 14:37). This authority makes it canonical. No creed or Church Council can make a book authoritative unless the book has authority! *Note:* This point should be recalled as we consider the Apocryphal books.
      - a) *The Gospels and Epistles were not the product of some recognition of inspiration on the part of the church; they were the basis for such recognition. The church did not have to go into the question: “Will there be one or several gospels, or a harmony of the four? Will there be a need for additional accounts, from less authorized sources?” The gospels simply were there, as well as the epistles and Revelation, supported only by apostolic authority” (Rene Pache, *The Inspiration And Authority Of Scripture*, p. 162).*
      - b) *From available information, the gradual process that led to full and formal public recognition of a fixed canon of the twenty-seven books comprising the New*

*Testament takes us down into the fourth century of our era.* (Philip Comfort, ed., *The Origin Of The Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Wheaton, IL, 1992, 66).

- 4)  Canonicity required certain periods of time to elapse before the Book was recognized.
  - 5) Canonicity was an issue decided long ago but whose conclusions were unsettled by liberal philosophies of the Modern Era (in early 1900's). "From this we see that the canon was not given at one stated time. Gaussen uses the illustration of a bouquet which a woman holds in her hands as she slowly walks through a garden, with its owner accompanying her. As she strolls along, he presents her with one flower after another until a whole bouquet has been gathered. The bouquet exists and is admired before it is complete—indeed, from the very moment the first blossoms are put together; thus the canon was in the hands of God's people from the moment that the first inspired scriptures were placed there" (Pache, 162).
  - 6) *Note:* "The gradual process which led to full and formal public recognition of a fixed canon of the twenty-seven books comprising the New Testament takes us down into the fourth century of our era" (Comfort, p. 66). The Books were recognized as inspired prior to this time but this is the date when the official definition was made.
2.  An important question is, "**Why is an acceptable or recognized Canon necessary?**"

Since the Holy Scriptures originate from God, it is obvious that He knows which writings are inspired—God does not need a Canon! The necessity for Canon focuses upon man's needs. Why does man need a Canon of Holy Scripture? Why can man not gain profit from every talented religious writing? Why must man measure and rule every religious writing to determine its origin?

a.  ***Because only the Canonical are "profitable"*** (2 Timothy 3:16).

- 1) The canonicity distinguishes the books which have originated from God and which are authoritative in religious beliefs and practices (Matthew 7:21, 24).
- 2) The canonicity distinguishes the unique character of biblical writings from other religious literature because it marks it as the words of God and not of man.
- 3) "**The formulation of the Canon of the New Testament**"

After a Gospel or an Epistle had been written, it would remain for some time the treasured possession of the individual or the church that had received it. In some cases the originals would be passed from church to church (as for example Colossians and perhaps Ephesians), but they would, no doubt, always find their way back to the original recipient of them. By and by the originals were more freely circulated and copied. Undoubtedly often individuals and churches would make copies of the documents in their possession and send them to other individuals and churches, and sometimes individuals and churches may have sent scribes to make copies at the place where the originals were found. Thus gradually the churches all over the world would obtain a more or less complete set of the inspired writings of the new dispensation.

But the limits of the Canon were not at once established. A number of other writings than those in our present New Testament appeared early which were by some considered of equal authority with them...

Even less important books were sometimes highly regarded...These books hovered on the border of Canon in some sections of the country for a time, but were all rejected by and by...

Soon the books which we now consider canonical were gathered together. The process of collecting began almost immediately after the books had been written. Peter already speaks of the Pauline Epistles as well known (2 Pet. 3:15, 16)...the Pauline Epistles seem to have been the first to be gathered together and published...The Synoptic Gospels were undoubtedly collected about the same time or only a little later...

The process of collecting and publishing the recognized books continued into the second century. Kenyon says, the adoption of the codex form, i.e., our modern book form, by the Christians early in the second century, made possible the inclusion of a much larger quantity of material than was possible in a roll...By and by the remaining books of our present New Testament were collected, and the whole came now to be classified as the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, Acts, the Catholic Epistles, and the Apocalypse. But the full recognition of some of these books was delayed for a time in certain quarters.

(F)rom the time of Irenaeus the New Testament was composed essentially of the same books which we receive at the present, and that they were regarded with the same reverence as is now shown to them...

Several things very materially promoted the formation of the New Testament Canon. There was, first of all, the influence of the incomplete Canon of Marcion (c. 140), which was being widely accepted and threatened to destroy the authority of the other inspired books...Then there was the recognition by many leaders, primarily in the East, of the *First Epistle of Clement*, the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, as canonical or semi-canonical, that gave further impetus to the settling of the limits of the Canon....And a little later, the edict of Diocletian (in 303) that all sacred books be destroyed by fire, gave further stimulus to the sorting and sifting of the books that were to be guarded against destruction. It is probably due to this persecution under Diocletian that we have so little of the New Testament from the first three centuries. These three primary factors led to the collecting and publishing of those books which the church came to regard as equally authoritative with the books of the Old Testament.









(Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Wm. B. Eerdmans' Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI 1973, 6-9)

- b. **☞ Because of heresy threatening God's saints.**
- 1) False teachers attempted to fashion their own Canon.
    - a) ☞ Marcion (c. 140 A.D.) Was known as an early heretic. He accepted ten epistles of Paul, a mutilated version of Luke's Gospel, and none of the Old Testament!
    - b) ☞ Montanus (c. 150 A.D.) Was a heretic who declared that the gift of prophecy was permanently granted to the church and that he was a prophet who could give inspired instructions. His assertion intensified efforts to establish a basic authority. In response to his heresy, apostolic authority (authorship) became the only standard for identifying God's revelation.
  - 2) ☞ Christians were compelled to "try" false teachers (1 John 4:1) and the Canon was the best way they could accomplish this. Marcion's mutilated Canon was used to destroy the authority of the inspired books. The situation was intolerable and Irenaeus and Tertullian both wrote about how Marcion ruined the integrity of the Scriptures.
  - 3) In response to heresies that used non-inspired books as their authority in religious beliefs and practices.
 

☐ "It is no later than the last half of the second century when substantial lists of the New Testament books appear. An example of one of these lists from this time is known as the Muratorian Fragment...Part of this early list of the New Testament books has been lost. The Gospel of Luke is the first mentioned by name, but it is referred to as the 'third' Gospel, indicating that Matthew and Mark were at the head of the list; then ☐ follows John, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul and others. The only books not included in the list are Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter and 1 John, and were it not for a text seemingly derived from a mutilated copy the list undoubtedly would be more complete. On any other assumption it is difficult to account for the omissions, especially those of 1 Peter and 1 John. Notwithstanding these omissions this early list provides in broad outline the substance of our modern New Testament"

(Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got The Bible*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1970, 84, 85).
- c. ☞ **Because of persecutions.** Under the Roman Emperors (Diocletian in 303 A.D.) it was a capital crime to have a copy of the Christian Scriptures. This made it necessary for believers to know which writings were worthy of death. Only the most precious books would be preserved.
- d. ☞ **Because of the codex form of binding writings.** In early times the Scriptures were written on scrolls which were kept in large jars. The early Christians adopted the codex (book) form for binding their sacred writings. The popularity of the codex required the Christians to determine which writings should be bound together.
- e. ☞ **Because of the Protestant Reformation.** During the Reformation Movement there was a great emphasis on Scriptural authority and a rejection of Tradition. In order to

know what was Scriptural authority the Canon had to be re-examined. It was during this time that the Protestant Churches refused to include the Apocrypha in their Bibles.

3.  **The Recognition of the Inspired Canon.** The process by which the inspired Scriptures were canonized is briefly detailed. A much longer discussion of this process will be presented when we consider the Old Testament Canon and New Testament Canon.
  - a.  The Old Testament Canon is established with a solid foundation. Our Lord's own approval stamps the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God.
  - b.  The New Testament Canon was established by the fourth century and its formulation can be summarized in five stages. We only notice the major trends in each stage. (See Comfort, *The Origin Of The Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, IL, 1992, 68-74).
    - 1)  *The First Century* Within the writings are repeated exhortations for reading and study (1 Thessalonians 5:27; 2:13; 1 Corinthians 14:37; Colossians 4:16; Revelation 1:3). In 95 A.D. Clement of Rome wrote to Corinth using a free rendering of material found in Matthew/Luke. His writings also reflect influence from the books of 1 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, Ephesians, and Hebrews.
    - 2)  *The First Half of the Second Century* The John Rylands papyrus shows John's writings were revered and copied by about 125 A.D., within 30-35 years of his death. There is evidence that all of the Gospels and Paul's Epistles were known and used in the centers of Christianity. Acceptance of the books as inspired happened spontaneously as authorship and content became known. The first three "Church Fathers" (Clement, Polycarp, Ignatius) used the bulk of the New Testament in ways that authenticated their origin.
    - 3)  *The Second Half of the Second Century* Irenaeus quotes from almost all of the New Testament on the basis of its authority and asserts the Apostles' inspiration. Tatian (pupil of Justin Martyr) made a harmony of the four Gospels asserting that while other "gospels" had come into existence only four were recognized as inspired. About 170 the Muratorian Canon was made which accepted the majority of New Testament books (it was mutilated at both ends so some books were missing) and it rejected by name various heretical books. By 170 A.D. The New Testament Canon is represented with no additions and only 2 Peter was not listed!
    - 4)  *The Third Century* Origen was a scholar and writer. He wrote commentaries on most every book of the New Testament. Dionysus of Alexandria (student of Origen) stated the West accepted the book of Revelation while the East rejected it; the West rejected the book of Hebrews while the East accepted it. Other books under question were: 2 Peter and Jude.
    - 5)  *The Fourth Century* Early in this period the status of Canon clarified. Eusebius (bishop of Caesarea and great historian) stated these points in regard to the Canon: (1) Universally recognized were the four Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles which included Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation. (2) Admitted as canonical by a majority,

but disputed by some were James, 2 Peter, 2, 3 John, and Jude. (3) Listed as spurious were The Acts of Paul, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas.

In the latter half of this period the New Testament Canon found final approval. In 367 A.D. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria issued a letter eliminating the use of the Apocryphal books and listing the twenty-seven New Testament books as the final authority.

☞ At the close of the century (397 A.D.) The Council of Carthage decreed that the twenty-seven books were inspired and only these were to be read in the church.

#### 4. Concluding Thoughts:

☞ Man needed a Canon of Scripture because...

- a. He needed to know which books God inspired so he could gain the divine wisdom necessary for life and godliness.
- b. ☞ He needed a standard to reject error and follow Truth
- c. ☞ God provided man this Canon because...
  - 1) He knew that in future centuries man would not be able to distinguish between the divinely inspired books and the spurious books. Providence has provided ample information by which the Canon of Scriptures can be supported. God has provided support for the Canon via history, literature, and providential protection of His written Word. The honest seeker has no trouble discerning the true Canon of inspired writings.
  - 2) ☞ He truly desires that man understand the divine wisdom and find the joys of salvation in Christ.



## **Significant Points to Ponder About Canon!**

**Canonicity is . . .**  
**Inseparably linked to Inspiration!**  
**Not decided by human votes!**  
**Determined by Book's authority!**  
**Required time lapses!**  
**Decided centuries ago!**

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## **WHY IS AN ACCEPTABLE CANON NECESSARY?**

**Only the Canonical are profitable!**

**Canonicity distinguishes as “inspired”!**

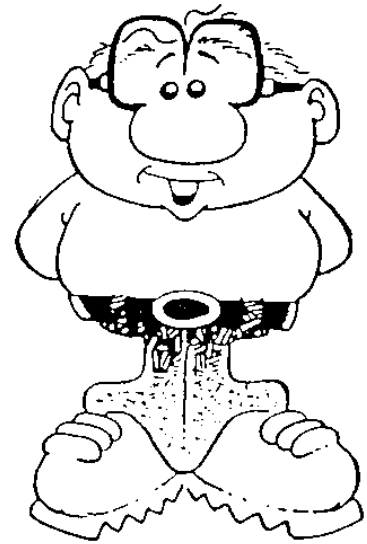
**Heresy threatened!**

**Persecutions made it necessary!**

**The codex binding required it!**

**The Protestant Reformation!**

# **CANONIZATION PROCESS SUMMARIZED**



## **The Old Testament Canon**

## **The New Testament Canon**

**The First Century**

**The First Half—Second Century**

**The Second Half—Second Century**

**The Third Century**

**The Fourth Century**

Transparency 5/3

**SUMMARY:  
WHY MANKIND  
NEEDED A  
CANON**



**HE NEEDED...**

**Knowledge about which books were  
inspired.**

**A standard to reject error and accept  
Truth.**

**GOD PROVIDED BECAUSE...**

**In the future man would need to  
distinguish.**

**He wants man to understand the divine  
wisdom.**