



Canon: Which Books Belong?

Lesson Six: The Governing Principles of Canon

1. ☞ The accumulation of 66 Books in the Holy Scripture was no accident. The books were compiled only after close inspection acclaimed they were inspired!
 - a. “The key to canonicity is **divine inspiration**. Therefore, the method of determination is not one of selection from a number of possible candidates (there are *NO* other candidates, in actuality) but one of recognition by an ever-widening circle as the facts of its origin become known” (Philip Comfort, ed., *The Origin Of The Bible*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Wheaton, IL, 1992, 75).
 - b. Our present lesson focuses upon the **process** by which books were accepted, or rejected, in the Canon of the Bible. ☞ The Bible student can be confident that the Holy Scriptures were not haphazardly thrown together.
 - 1) ☞ God’s desire to reveal divine wisdom to man provided the books of the Bible.
 - 2) ☞ God’s providence guarded this divine revelation so man would feel secure in knowing that God’s wisdom (will) can be fully known. As we examine the basis for accepting books as “inspired” we will find a great satisfaction that the books of the Bible (the 66) are indeed from God!
 - 3) Three points will be used to provide the student with the assurance that the Bible contains only those books “inspired of God.”
 - a) ☞ Canon Parameters—The Determining Tests
 - b) ☞ Canon Parameters—The Writings Divided
 - c) ☞ Canon Parameters—The Limit of 66 Books
2. ☞ Confidence in the Canon of 66 books can be easily obtained. The Canon was determined by a list of qualifying criteria that were designed to eliminate all but the inspired writings.
☞ Before any book was accepted into the Canon it had to qualify by passing three tests.

Note: The early Church performed these “tests” and by 200 A.D. the New Testament Canon was added to the Old Testament Canon and recognized as God’s revealed Word (Pache, 176b, 178; Comfort, 69-74; Thiessen, 10).

Confidence in the testing procedure can be certain because:

- a. 📖 The Canon was decided early in history. As noted above, by 200 A.D. the New Testament Canon was added to the Old Testament Canon and recognized as God's revealed Word (Pache, 176b, 178; Comfort, 69-74; Thiessen, 10).
 - b. 📖 These tests were performed by those who had close ties with the writers and were familiar with the writings. Their close proximity allowed them to discern critically the authentic and judge the authoritative.
 - c. 📖 The testimony of history verifies that absoluteness existed concerning the Canon. Early Church History testifies that the Canon was fixed and unaltered until later Church History (The Council of Trent, 1546).
3. 📖 The selection of books to be included in the New Testament Canon was achieved by a careful process. The following tests were applied to each book to determine its canonicity:
- a. 📖 **AUTHORSHIP**
 - 1) The writing had to originate with an Apostle or from one closely associated with an Apostle.
 - 2) This is known as the test of "Apostolicity."
 - 3) This test determined the acceptability of the several books:
 - a) The Gospel of Mark because Mark was associated with Peter;
 - b) The Gospel of Luke and Acts because Luke was the companion of Paul;
 - c) The Books of James and Jude because they were the brothers of our Lord and were considered to be companions to the Apostles; and
 - d) The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is unknown and many credit it to Paul. The lack of known authorship kept this Epistle among the debated books for many years.
 - b. 📖 **INTRINSIC WORTH**
 - 1) If the book spoke with authority and its message surpassed the normal standards, it was judged inspired.
 - 2) The Epistle to the Hebrews was canonized because of this fact. The early Christians refused to discard this epistle even though authorship was unknown.
 - 3) This factor was responsible for eliminating most Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal books.

“The gap between the canonical and the non-canonical books is so wide, the difference is so clear, that it is easy to tell which books should be rejected...These apocryphal books are so inferior to the canonical works that comparison will show why they were rejected” (Neale Pryor, *You Can Trust Your Bible*. Quality Publications: Abilene, TX 79603, 1980, 37).

Note: When we discuss the Apocryphal Books in lessons seven and eight we will make a brief comparison as suggested.

c.  **CONSISTENCY OF DOCTRINE**

- 1) It was expected that any writing from God would be consistent in all aspects of doctrine and application.
- 2) In this point we can see the providence of God’s plan. The long ministry of the Apostles allowed Christians to become very familiar with inspired teaching (Acts 2:42) and writings (1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2:15). This familiarity enabled the Christians to judge the writings and determine their validity.
- 3) It was this point that validated the Epistle of Jude.

d.  **ACCEPTANCE OF WRITINGS**

- 1) Were the writings universally accepted or were they restricted to a particular region?
- 2) Many of the books were universally accepted and this allowed them to be canonized almost immediately (Paul’s Epistles, 2 Peter 3:15, 16).
- 3) Many of the Apocryphal Books were geographically limited and thus eliminated.
- 4) One of the tests of universality was the citation of the writings by authors in the early Church. The inspired texts were quickly recognized and used by authors writing about Christianity.
 - a) Peter referred to Paul (2 Peter 3:15-16).
 - b) Paul quoted from Luke (1 Timothy 5:18; Luke 10:7).
 - c) Clement of Rome (c. 96 A.D.) quoted 1 Corinthians and others parts of the New Testament.
 - d) “It is very remarkable that, fifty years after the death of the last apostle, there were found in the writings of the defenders of the faith and also in those of heretics exact quotations from the whole New Testament (except for six or seven of the very shortest letters); both groups referred to it for their authority”

(Rene Pache, *The Inspiration And Authority Of Scripture*, 175).

- e) The commentaries and translations of the Early Church period established the fact that the New Testament writings were inspired while other religious writings, while respected and read, were thought to be non-inspired.
4. ☞ As these tests were made on the religious writings of the Early Church period, two large divisions in religious literature appeared.

“Generally speaking, from the time of Irenaeus (c. 150 A.D.) on the New Testament contained practically the same books as we receive today, and were regarded with the same reverence that we bestow on them today, as we have already learned from Westcott; but there was a minority that continued to question the genuineness and authority of some of the books for a long time” (H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction To The New Testament*, 10).

- a. ☞ There was a classification of books recognized as the **HOMOLOGOUMENA**. These were books that had universal recognition as Holy Scripture. These included: the four Gospels, the thirteen epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Acts, and Revelation.
- b. ☞ There was a classification of books recognized as the **ANTILEGOMENA**. This group contained books that were debated and which faced opposition in universal acceptance. Later a division was made within this category that further separated the debated books into two groups. This further division helps us recognize the recognition that some books were inspired while others were not.
 - 1) Those writings merely “disputed.” This included the writings that were partially accepted but which struggled with some of the tests for full validation. This group included: the epistles of James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John, and 3 John.
 - 2) ☞ Those writings that were considered as “spurious.” These were writings that were rejected by the majority of tests. These writings were known by many but were not accepted as inspired teachings. This group included: the Apocrypha books of The Acts of Paul, The Shepherd of Hermas, The Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas, and the Didache.
 - 3) The reason that some canonical books were suspect is understandable.
 - a) ☞ The Apostles had warned believers to be wary of teachers and writings (Galatians 1:8, 9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1, 2; 1 John 4:1). Spurious epistles and false teachers were common.
 - b) ☞ Internal evidence of these books often confused their status.
 - i. Hebrews does not give an author’s name and differs in style and vocabulary from Paul’s other epistles.

- ii. 2 Peter differs markedly from 1 Peter.
 - iii. James and Jude present themselves as “servants” and not “Apostles.”
 - iv. In 2, 3 John the author calls himself a “presbyter” not an Apostle.
 - v. The epistle of Jude quotes an Apocryphal Book.
 - vi. These were written either generally or to a private person and not to specific churches.
- c) All of the questionable factors were gradually resolved and these came to be universally accepted.
5. 📖 How did the number “66” become the accepted number for the Canon?
- a. The books were written for specific purposes. In later years these letters were preserved, collected, and presented as God’s revelation to man.
 - b. These books were not written to form the Bible—there was not a deliberate endeavor on the authors’ part to compile a volume of 66 books. The authors probably had no idea that their writings would be collected and develop into the Bible. The Early Church realized the value of these books and kept them safe.
 - c. The deaths of the Apostles and inspired writers emphasized the urgency of keeping these letters safe.
 - d. The present Bible has 66 books because the Old Testament and New Testament gradually developed into that number.
 - 1) 📖 The Old Testament was divided into three parts by the Jews—The Law, The Prophets, and The Writings (sometimes called The Psalms). Each of these divisions was composed of books that were deemed “inspired.” Some of the Old Testament books were questioned (Esther, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ezekiel). The numbering of books varies—the Hebrew Bible has 22 or 24 books and the English Bible has 39. These contain the exact material but the Hebrew Bible combined some of the books that are separated in the English Bible.
 - 2) 📖 The New Testament developed, as did the Old Testament, in three categories—The Gospels, The Pauline Epistles, The General Epistles. Their number (27) was decided early in Church History and was confirmed in the fourth century.
6. 📖 Christians can rest assured that the Books of the Bible have undergone close scrutiny before being accepted as God’s Word. This confidence can be summarized with the following points...

- a. ☞ Canon was not established by mortal wisdom that exalted man's literature to a divine status. Canon was determined by Inspiration's quality. All writings recognized as inspired today have been recognized since 200 A.D. From the beginning the Inspired Scriptures were recognized as more vastly superior than any other literary work!
- b. ☞ Providence guarded the Scriptures and prevented any illegitimate books from invading the Faith. All writings were examined freely and unhurriedly and little by little all the inferior writings were set aside.
- c. ☞ Churches never put into the Canon any doctrine that was contrary. Hence, there was never accepted into the Canon any teaching that included—the worship of Mary, angels, saints, and images; teachings on purgatory were never included nor were prayers to the dead, baptism as a sacrament, etc.

“One can therefore see an astonishing fact emerge: the church definitely and formerly accepted as divine some books unfavorable to its own inclinations, and everywhere it rejected as merely human others which would favor its inclinations the most” (Pache, 181).

- d. ☞ Unity is only possible if we follow the accepted Canon. “And if there is one basis on which true believers in Christ can still meet, it is indeed on this one: the sole authority of the whole of Scripture, with its sixty-six canonical books, inspired, grouped together, and guarded by divine watch-care” (Pache, 185).

Assurance Validated!



CANON PARAMETERS . . .

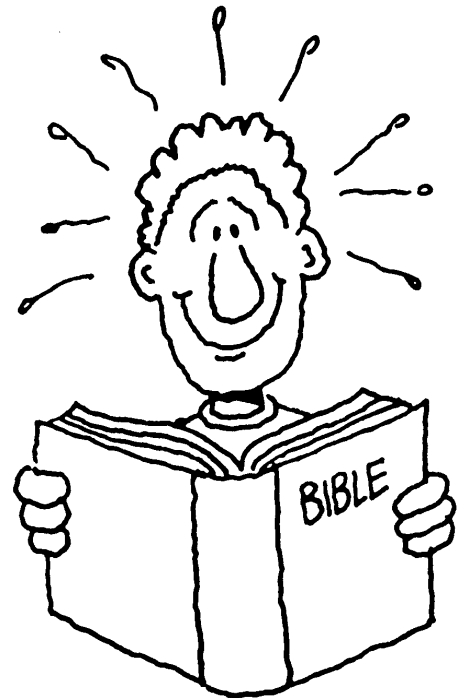
The Determining Tests!

The Writings Divided!

The Limit of 66!

Transparency 6/1

CONFIDENCE IN THE CANON



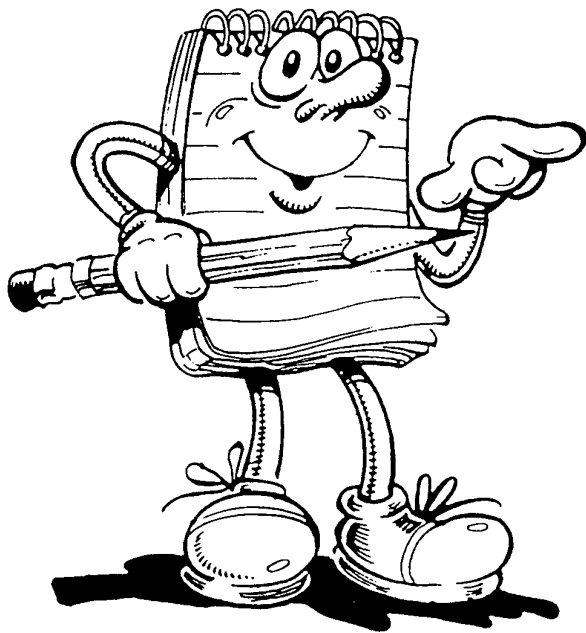
Decided early!

**Decided by those qualified to
judge!**

**Decisions have been validated
by history!**

Transparency 6/2

THE TESTS OF CANON



Apostolicity

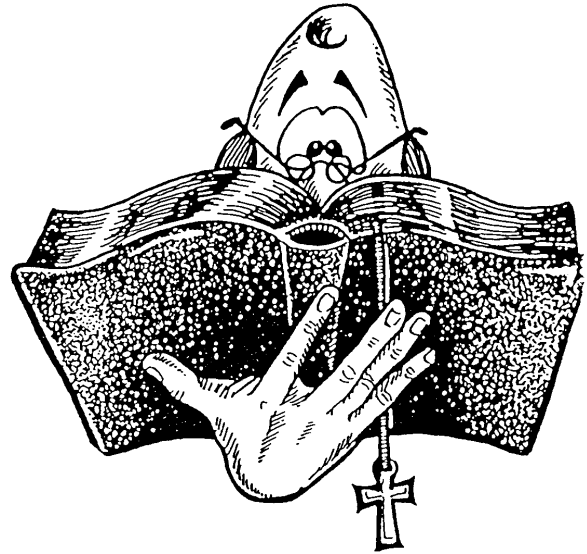
Intrinsic Worth

Consistency

Universality

Transparency 6/3

DIVISIONS OF THE EXAMINATIO

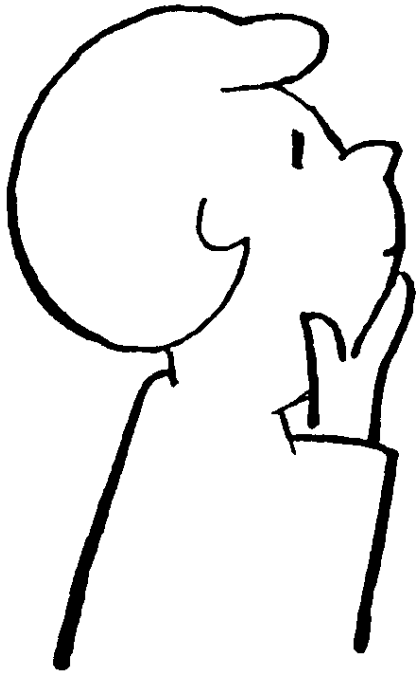


HOMOLOGOUMENA

ANTILEGOMENA

- 1) Disputed**
- 2) Spurious**

Transparency 6/4



Why Just 66 Books?

Specific purposes

The OT developed into 39 (22)

The NT developed into 27

**By the 4th Century the number
was confirmed at 66**

Transparency 6/5



SUMMARY OF CONFIDENCE

Inspiration revealed divine Truth

**Providence guarded this
revelation**

**The early church respected God's
revelation**

Unity is only possible via Canon

Transparency 6/6