

Lesson 7

THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The word “canon” means a rule or list and speaks of the right of a particular book to a place in the Bible.
- B. The New Testament canon contains 27 books, being divided into the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), History (Acts), the Pauline Epistles (may include Hebrews), the General Epistles (James to Jude) and Prophecy (Revelation).
- C. By the end of the first century, all the 27 books were in existence. James is the earliest book, having been written before 49 AD, and the Apocalypse (Revelation) is certainly the latest, dating from about 95 AD

II. VIEWS ON DETERMINING THE CANON

- A. Roman Catholics: The Roman Catholic believes that authority rests in the Roman Catholic Church and the church is infallible. The Church is the custodian of the Scriptures in that it collects them into a canon, informs the believers and the world that they are the word of God, interprets them, and supervises their translation. Thus a book is canonical because the church declares it so.
- B. Orthodox Protestants: The fundamental position is that the 27 books were part of the canon the moment they were written because they were inspired by God and fully authoritative. The books possessed canonicity by virtue of their inspiration, not by virtue of being “voted” into canonicity by any group. The church simply recognized the inherent authority I these writings. The church did not add any authority to it.

III. ORAL TRADITION

- A. For 20 years after the ascension of Christ, not one New Testament book was written. During this time, the Apostles were still living and the message of Christ was passed on by oral tradition (word of mouth).
- B. But even during this time there was a need to put oral tradition into writing; letters were written, the Apostles were dying, there was a need to put the teachings of Christ in permanent form, etc. There was the *testimonia*, which were general Christian teachings with proof texts from the Old Testament, and the *loggia*, which are collections of Christ’s teachings. NOTE: The writers of the Gospels undoubtedly had many of these sources at their disposal when writing their gospels.

IV. NEED FOR A CANON

- A. The Apostles were dying and there was a need for a written record so Christians could be instructed. NOTE: Remember that by 100 AD all the New Testament books were in existence and circulating among the churches.
- B. The content and character of the writings themselves was sufficient reason to gather them together into a canon.
- C. The Old Testament canon provided a model for the New Testament and a permanent record of Christ and His Church should be preserved for future generations.
- D. The letters and teachings of the Apostles were used in the public worship services of the Christians and it would be logical to put them into a canon.
- E. Controversy with heresy in the early church was met by quotes from Christ and the Apostles. Therefore it would be necessary to determine which books were inspired by God.

- F. Persecution by the state, especially Diocletian (303 AD) made it necessary for Christians to determine which books were really canonical. If a person was going to be martyred for possessing scripture, he wanted to make sure he was going to die for inspired scripture.
- G. After the first century, books rather than scrolls were used in writing and this made it easier to collect a canon.

V. REASONS FOR THE SLOW RECOGNITION OF THE CANON

- A. Poor Communications: In those days there were not any telephones, newspapers, magazines, etc., and there was limitation of travel. It took months and years for many of the books to be read by Christians in the early church.
- B. Oral Tradition: The early church preferred oral tradition at first until they saw a great need for a canon.
- C. Old Testament: The early Christians were attracted to the Old Testament because this was their Bible. There was a tendency to stick with the Old Testament and not form a New Testament canon.

VI. DEVELOPMENT AND RECOGNITION OF THE CANON

- A. The Non-canonical Books: After the first century there were many apocryphal gospels, letters and prophecies written that were not canonical: 1 and 2 Clement, Didache, Epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Hebrews, Apocalypse of Peter, etc. NOTE: Some in the early church did think some of these books to be canonical, but they lost out because they did not meet the internal and external tests of canonicity.
- B. Tests of Canonicity: There were four things which aided in the determination of which books should be accepted as canonical:
 1. Inspiration: This was the ultimate test; that is, could it meet the inherent test of inspiration?
 2. Apostolicity: Was the book written by an Apostle or by one who was closely associated with an Apostle (the gospels of Luke and Mark were accepted as canonical because of their close relationship to the Apostles)?
 3. Contents: Were the contents of the book doctrinally accurate and of a spiritual character?
 4. Universality: did the church universally receive the book?

I. DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANON

- A. All books of the canon were in existence by the end of the first century.
- B. The writers of the inspired books claimed authority for their writings and recognized the writings of others (cf. 1 Thess. 5:26; Col. 4:16; 2 Pet. 3:15-16; 1 Tim. 5:18). NOTE: Jude 17-18 says that 2 Peter 3:3 is a word from the Apostles.
- C. Letters were to be read to others besides the initial recipients (Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3 and possibly Eph. 1:1, if the phrase “in Ephesus” is to be omitted).
- D. Copies would be made of these letters and passed out among the Christians. Paul’s epistles were the first to be collected and then slowly the other canonical books were recognized. NOTE: All copying of the original manuscripts was done with great care because they felt they were dealing with inspired scripture.
- E. From 70 to 120 AD: The Apostolic Fathers quoted freely from all books of the New Testament except Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Titus and Philemon.
- F. From 120 to 170 AD: The Church Fathers of this period were apologists who were defending the Faith to the pagan world. Thus there was much controversy centered on the person and work of Christ and the apologists needed the true gospels. These men quoted or recognized all the New Testament books except Jude and 2 and 3 John. NOTE: During this time Marcion, the heretic, in 140 AD, drew up his own canon. He accepted Luke and ten Pauline epistles. This undoubtedly forced an examination of the canonical books by the Church. POINT: By the end of 170 AD the New Testament was practically complete and recognized as canonical by the Church.
- G. From 170 to 220 AD: The Church Fathers of this period are called polemicists because they were protecting the Church from heresy. The whole canon was in existence by this time but

the extent of the canon was questioned. The Gospels, Acts, Epistles of Paul and most of the Catholic Epistles were accepted. There was doubt about James, Jude, 2 and 3 John, Hebrews and Revelation. The reason for this doubt was because these books were not universally known or it could not be proven that an Apostle wrote them. NOTE: During this time the Muratorian Fragment (170 AD) is dated, which lists the Gospels, Acts, eleven of Paul's epistles, Jude, 1 and 2 John, 1 Peter and Revelation as part of the canon.

- H. From 220 to 397 AD: By this time the churches in the west accepted fully all the books except Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John. However these were later recognized and at the Council of Carthage (397 AD) the 27 books we now possess were pronounced canonical. The eastern section of the church accepted all books as canonical except Revelation, but this too was later accepted. The Council of Hippo (419 AD) confirmed the decision of the Council of Carthage.

II. THE CANON IS CLOSED

- A. Scriptural Reason: Jude 3 speaks of "the faith once and for all delivered to the saints." The Faith has been preserved for future generations in the written Word, the Bible. Jude was written in 72 AD and the only New Testament books not written then were the Gospel of John, epistles of John and Revelation. Any books written after Jude must harmonize with the existing canonical books. POINT: Many books did not harmonize and were put out of the canon.
- B. Theological Reasons:
1. Christ is the ultimate and final revelation of scripture (Heb. 1:1-3), and there need not be any more revelation. The gospels simply tell about the history of Christ, the epistles interpret the life of Christ, and the Revelation tells us about the future coming of Christ. This is all recorded in the Bible.
 2. The Apostolic office passed out of existence after the first century. With the passing of this office, there were no more Apostles to write inspired scripture. Thus the canon is closed.
 3. God wanted to reveal Himself. Therefore, He oversaw the writing, collecting and preserving of the Bible. There is an element of faith involved, but it is not presumption or based on ignorance, for there is good historical evidence for our fundamental beliefs in the canon. It is reasonable to accept the 27 books of the New Testament canon. By faith we acknowledge (1) that God eliminated the uninspired writings; (2) that God supernaturally controlled the recognition of the inspired writings which otherwise would tend to be eliminated; and (3) that God superintended in the council decisions for the totality of the inspired writings.
- C. Logical Reason: Those who had the best opportunity for determining canonicity (the early church) judged the 27 books to be canonical.
- D. Historical Reason: No serious effort has ever been made to reinstate the uncanonical books or add new books to the New Testament canon.
- E. Experiential Reason: The 27 books have a saving and edifying power when applied by the Holy Spirit, which none of the early century apocryphal books inherently demonstrate.

III. ARE THERE ANY LOST INSPIRED BOOKS?

- A. If a book were found that met all the tests of canonicity, would this be placed in the canon?
The answer is yes, but apparently the canon is closed and God intended it to be that way.

Archeologists have found portions of writings that were circulating after the first century, such as Saying of Jesus, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth and the Gospel of Philip. None of these met the internal qualifications of inspiration and most are filled with Gnostic sayings which was an early heresy.