

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 9: The Canon of Scripture

Canon: How Did We Get Our Bible?

I. Focusing the Issue

A. Canon – means “measuring reed” or “ruler” and refers to a standard. Today it typically refers to the list of accepted books.

1. The question is over which books carry the authority of being God’s Word.
2. Second, who gets to decide which books are in and what does that privilege say about their authority?

B. The debate is mostly about the NT canon. There is strong evidence to conclude that the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible/Masoretic Text was complete by the time of the NT.

1. Books called “Apocrypha” or “Deuterocanonical” were largely recognized as uninspired and not authoritative.
2. Not until the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in 1546 did the Catholic church include some of these books into the list of authoritative texts.

C. Most of the questions of canon have to do with the NT, which will be our focus from here on.

II. Popular Theories on How the Canon Formed and the Criteria Used

A. Canon by Oppression: (Church Authority) Many have claimed that the Bible was established to promote the teachings of the more powerful Christians.

The DaVinci Code

Prof. Teabing, “many scholars claim that the early church literally stole Jesus from his original followers, hijacking his human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power.”

1. Most common theory is that the Council of Nicea in 325 chose their favored books and banned ones they disagreed with.
2. No record of any discussion about the canon at the council.
3. No church council gives any type of authoritative declaration until the Council of Trent in 1546.
4. It wasn’t that the church didn’t have a Bible until then, but could it be that no one needed a church council to decide what everyone already knew?

B. Canon by Orthodoxy: Church decided which books got into the Bible based on which best fit their theology.

1. But, the NT is filled with challenging books that make theologically controversies common. The church seemed to unintentionally create controversies because of the diversity.
2. They did a poor job of it if the church created a canon to eliminate controversy.

C. Canon by Pragmatism: The Church included the books that were the most practical for the church as a whole.

1. The fact is the church never did find James particularly useful! Nor Jude, nor 2 Peter, nor 2 and 3 John, nor even Philemon! Yet each was included from early on.

D. Canon by Strict Apostolicity: The Church choose books solely on the claim that these books were written by the apostles.

1. They include Hebrews which doesn’t claim apostolic authorship.

2. Why didn't they keep other letters of Paul? We know he wrote others; what happened to them?

E. Self-Authenticating Canon: self-attesting AND self-establishing

1. If these books really were inspired by God, then they were God's word as soon as they were penned. And, this is actually how we see the Bible take shape.
2. The history of the formation of the Bible was not the history of decisive decrees. It was the history of slowly recognizing and acknowledging authority that was already there.
3. The scriptures are "self-authenticating" meaning they did not rely upon individuals, authorities or councils to gain their legitimacy...they were intrinsically authentic.
4. And self-establishing: the books did not rely upon others to determine that they were Bible-worthy.

The scriptures create, establish, and define the church, the church did not create the scriptures.

"Apostolicity," "antiquity," and "orthodoxy," are not criteria by which the church autonomously judged which documents it wanted, but qualities the church recognizes in the voice of its Savior. Likewise, "liturgical use" and "church consensus" are reflections of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Charles Hill

III. Can This Argument Be Proven? Let's look at evidence that demonstrates this was how Christians understood the Bible.

1) The NT teaching by apostles is how the Old Testament said it would happen (and the apostles believed it)

Acts 13:46 and following. Paul and Barnabas quote Isaiah 49:6

"For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles [who is the light: apostles; how are they a light: their word], that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" All this was predicted by Isaiah how it would come about.

See Acts 10:38-43 and Acts 26:22-3. The apostles point out this was always the plan, though not immediately recognized.

2) Jesus gave the apostles this task. Jesus in Matthew 10:40 and John 13:20 says, "*whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.*"

3) Apostles themselves understood their words to be more than advice. They were the very words of God. 2 Peter 3:16 Peter says of Paul. 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul's words are the Words of God.

4) Early Church practice

- a) Colossians 4:16, they are told to pass this letter around to other churches
- b) Ephesians has all the hallmarks of a circular, intended to be distributed

5) Other evidence

- Irenaeus in 160 AD in France states that there are just four Gospels.
- Tatian way over in Syria in 160 AD composes the *Diatessaron* a harmony of the Four Gospels
- At no point [especially very early on] were people debating about which Gospels were authentic or authoritative.
- See chart

IV. Word-Deed-Word Pattern

A. Throughout the course of God's dealings with humanity, word-revelation has accompanied His redemptive acts in history.

1. God's confrontation of Adam and Eve after their sin, His covenant with Abraham, His dramatic redemption of Israel from Egypt, His establishment of the Israelite monarchy, His judgment in exile, and then His restoration — all were followed by new revelation from God to His people.

2. Just so, when the promised Messiah came to redeem His people, a new and generous outpouring of divine revelation naturally followed (2 Tim. 1:8–11; Titus 1:1–3).
- B. Prophetic passages such as Isaiah 2:2–3; 49:6 and Psalm 2:8, indeed, predicted a time when the light of God’s grace would be proclaimed to all nations.
1. Jesus Christ, though He was the light of the world (John 8:12; 12:46), never in His adult life left the land of Palestine.
 2. He did bring light to the nations, of course, but it was through chosen apostles, whom He commissioned to be His authoritative representatives (Matt. 10:40: “Whoever receives you receives me”).
 3. These men were specially endowed by the Holy Spirit to “remember” Jesus’ words and works (John 14:26; 16:13–14) and to bear witness to Him “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8, see Matt. 28:19–20; Luke 24:48; John 17:14, 20).
- C. That this witness would eventuate in a new collection of written Scriptures — Gospels, apostolic history, letters, and prophecy — complementing the books of the old covenant follows naturally both from the pattern of God’s redemptive work in the past (mentioned above) and from the actual writing ministry of some of Jesus’ apostles and their associates in the accomplishment of their commission.
- D. Canon is Closed in Principle
1. Because of nature as deriving from apostolic commission -- the canon is inherently closed.
 2. It is necessarily limited to apostolic deposit (foundation) committed to the church. Ephesians 2:20

V. What can we say about Thomas and other “alternatives to orthodox” documents?

- A. Picture of authoritarian “winners” selecting books to help their cause has no basis
- B. These texts are not expansions of Christianity, but competing religions
- The Gospel of Thomas has no support of ever being recognized as authentic or authoritative.
 - Thomas is found with other Gnostic writings and displays clear Gnostic tendencies. Gnosticism was an early Greek philosophy that came about at least 100 years after Jesus and would have placed Jesus far afield from the Palestinian Judaism of the rest of the NT.
 - It doesn’t broaden our Christianity, it lessens it.
- C. Many “other Christianities” died-out without the help of the church
- Some of these movements failed on their own merit. For example, the Montanists totally miscalculated the end of the world. Thus becoming a laughing stock.
 - Even Bart Ehrman contends that the Ebionites and the Marcions died out more as a result of internal weakness and lack of popularity than by external pressure.
 - It has often been said that one of the best ways to assure oneself of the canonicity of the New Testament writings is to read some of their rivals.
- D. The books of the NT and the Christianity it expresses was not unique or divergent from the story of the OT.
1. Luke 24 the risen Jesus explains that all the Law and Prophets were about him. Other NT writings explain Jesus in the context of the story of Israel.
 2. Using drama as a metaphor, the NT can be seen as improvisation (more than restating) yet not ad-libbing. Vanhoozer writes:
 “Ad-libbing is the theatrical equivalent of heresy, where one person stubbornly insists on going his own way instead of playing the game. True improvisers work together; they are ‘one body’ who all contribute to the outcome of the play: ‘True genius in improvisation lies in the players’ achieving a creative harmony...”

“Indeed, one might say that the whole New Testament is an improvisation upon the Old. For, *what makes the whole Bible a unified canon is the unified action at its heart, and what gives the unified action closure is the recapitulation of all that has gone before in Jesus Christ.*”

E. This frames heresy, divergent Christianities, and non-canonical texts.

“‘A church that cannot experience heresy probably doesn’t have any commitments, any identity, any character. The possibility of heresy is simply the negative expression of a church’s having a confession of faith.’ Still, the purpose of doctrine is not to rend but to *mend* the body of Christ. It is therefore important to see that it is *false* teaching—heresy—that is the debilitating disease, the cancer in the body of Christ.” Kevin Vanhoozer

If we are to ever believe that God has spoken through scripture and it is not just a human invention, then Christianity is defined by the texts received and not the other way around (texts defined by our Christianity)