

The Church Receives the Canon, Part 1

Sources:

Scripture Alone, James R. White

The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible, Paul D. Wegner

The Doctrine of the Word of God, John M. Frame

Can We Still Believe the Bible? An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions, by Craig L. Blomberg

How We Got the Bible, Neil R. Lightfoot

The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures, D.A. Carson, editor

The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Considering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs, Craig L. Blomberg

The Origin of the Bible, F.F. Bruce, J.I. Packer, Philip Comfort, Carl F.H. Henry

Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books, Michael J. Kruger

How did the church affect which books ended up in the New Testament? Nine foundational assertions:

1. The term *church*, as used here, refers to all true believers, not to a formal church structure or central authority, nor to those who are professing to be Christians but are not.
2. The church didn't commission the books: God "commissioned" them.
3. The church didn't pre-determine the canon: God predetermined it.
4. The church didn't determine the canon after it was written: it had already been determined by God.
5. It was God's purpose that the church possess the canon; i.e., that Christians have access to the word of Christ so that the sheep could hear the Shepherd's voice.
6. God usually accomplishes His purposes through normal human means. Therefore, we expect that the church recognized and publicized the canon through normal processes.
 - a. We do not deny that the church had a role (see #8).
 - b. Human involvement is not the same thing as a "purely human affair" (Kruger 35), as so many assume.
 - c. We do not expect to find that all professing Christians unanimously agreed.

Kruger (197) observes that among critics of the Bible today there is a "relentless" and "near-obsessive" focus on early Christian diversity. "The mere existence of diversity itself has become the argument." And these critics have quietly slipped in a foundational assumption: "that the existence of diversity and disagreement is contrary to what we would expect if these twenty-seven books are really given by God." (198)

7. The Scriptures from God demonstrate unique divine qualities – they can be distinguished from purely human literature.
8. Because of the presence of the Spirit in the church, the church will be able to recognize those books that are truly from God (John 10:27; 1 Corinthians 2:12-14).
 - a. The cause of this is sometimes called the *testimonium*, the testimony of the Spirit indwelling the church.

“It is the people of God who, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, hunger and thirst for the Word of God, and they are the ones to whom the Scriptures were given for instruction and encouragement. In other words, the Spirit’s work was ‘bottom up,’ not ‘top down’; it was God’s people, gathered in worship and service to Christ, who passively received [i.e., they didn’t decide to create a set of Scriptures], from the hand of God by His Spirit, a functioning, sufficient knowledge of the canon. This then led to the outward, official recognition by the ecclesiastical structures of later church history.” (White, 108)

- b. This is why we do not deny that the church had a role.
 - c. The role is one of receiving, recognizing, and submitting to the canon, not creating, choosing, or establishing it.
 - d. This does not mean that each individual Christian can select his own canon: we are referring to the Spirit’s work in the church as a whole.
9. If the Scriptures are from God and the canon was established through His providential hand, then no human reason or historical evidences will ever be able to “prove” the canon. However, the historical evidence plays an important role in confirming the processes that Christians expect would have happened (and making it very unlikely that other processes, suggested by critics, could have happened).

Common theories or criticisms related to church and canon:

- There were many Christian writings which could have been Scripture, and the Roman Catholic Church was necessary to affirm or determine (depending on who you're talking to) which ones were Scripture.
- A group of bishops at the Council of Nicea chose the canon.
- Constantine used the political power of the Roman Empire to force a canon at the Council of Nicea.
- There were many gospels and letters proposed as Scripture by their authors and supporters, but some of those authors / supporters “won” and suppressed all the others.
- It took the church far too long to recognize these books: if they were really from God, it would have happened much faster.
- There was far too much disagreement about these books. If the Spirit was really at work in the church, they would have been much more unified.