

VIII. The Canon of Scripture

I. The Canon

- A. A “canon” (kanwn) refers to a rule, a standard or a measuring rod.
- B. The canon of Scripture refers to the list of inspired, authoritative books which comprise the rule for the faith and practice of the church.
- C. The OT and NT canon
 1. OT canon
39 OT books
Jewish division has 24: The Twelve, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah
 2. NT canon
27 books
The Gospels, Acts, the epistles of Paul, the general epistles and the Revelation of John.
- D. Historical developments of the canon
 1. We need to understand that there was a very *natural sense* to canonicity long before it was ever canonized, either OT or NT.
 2. OT canonicity was fairly straightforward
Deut. 18:14-19, 21-22; 13:1-3; Isa. 8:20
There was authority, there was verification, there was *analogia fidei*.

There was also an unfulfilled completion: e.g., Mal 4:5
The nature of the OT was expectation, promise, etc
There is an unsettled completion that prepared itself for fulfillment.

There was also the recognition of our Lord that the OT canon, as it had developed, was to be accepted – Matt. 23:35

In AD 90 in the city of Jamnia, the Rabbis gather to discuss the 39 (24) books of the OT. They believed they needed to officially codify what was canon.
The homolegoumena – the agreed books
The antilegomena – the disputed books
Song of Songs, Qoheleth, Esther

Ezekiel, Proverbs

3. NT canonicity also had a natural sense to it, although it became a little more complicated.
Christ Himself taught that He was the ultimate “Canon”
Lk. 24:44
He also established a formal authority – the Apostolate
Mk. 3:14; Eph. 2:20
He also promised (preauthenticated) their teaching
Jn. 14:26; 16:12-15

In this revelation there was also a deposit, a tradition and that which was received (and that which should not be received).
e.g., Jude 3

Then there arose the following heresies
Gnosticism, with its heretical teachings and heretical books

Marcion (AD 160)

Different gods between OT and NT
Rejection of OT and anything Jewish in the NT
Acceptance of only 10 Pauline letters, which in turn were edited according to his Gnostic commitments.

Montanism (c the same time)

Montanus claimed that he was an inspired instrument of the Holy Spirit to speak to the church. He then traveled with two prophetesses, who left their families. This raised the question for the church, “Where has God spoken?”

Eusebius, around AD 325 surveys the scene and acknowledges 27 books that occupied the place of authority in the church. He divided these into the homolegomena and the antilegomena. The antilegomena were simply disputed books, some argued in favor, others were unsure.

James, Jude, 2 Pet, 2 Jn and 3 Jn

Revelation also had some difficulties!

Athanasius in AD made the assertion that the 27 books were canonical because they were “the wellspring of salvation, from which he who thirsts make take his fill of the sacred words.”

Finally, in AD 397 in the Council of Cathage, the canonical books of the NT were formally recognized.

II. The Nature of Canonicity

A. The Roman Church's position

Trent and the Apocrypha:

These consist of seven books: Tobias, Judith, Baruch, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom, First and Second Machabees; also certain additions to Esther and Daniel.

There are more apocryphal books than the ones in the RC Bible.

Those are called deuterocanonical.

B. The real issue: conferral or recognition

1. "The canon is not the product of the Christian church. The church has not authority to control, create, or define the Word of God. Rather, the canon controls, creates and defines the church of Christ" (Bahnsen).

Is the canon a "collection of authoritative books" or an "authoritative collection of books"?

2. Canonicity and special revelation are not co-extensive
There is much that qualifies as special revelation that was never canonized (Jn. 21:25).
In fact, there was even that which was apostolic that was not canonized: 1 Cor. 5:9; 2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8).
3. Canonicity is the process where the church recognized that which is already canonical (inspired, authoritative and infallible rule/standard for the church).

C. The critical issue

1. In general, canonicity has not held nearly the place of importance that inerrancy has held.
It seems almost taken for granted!
2. In some estimations, it is evangelical's weakest link in our bibliology.

III. The Determination of Canonicity

A. The typical evangelical proposals for determining canonicity

1. The threefold test
 - a) apostolicity

- b) acceptance and usage by the church
 - c) The rule of faith
 - 2. The six fold test
 - a) apostolicity
 - b) antiquity
 - c) orthodoxy
 - d) catholicity
 - e) lection
 - f) inspiration
 - 3. The problem is that these criteria are not listed for us, they are *a posteriori*. These criteria are nowhere specified by the church!
The real problem is that they “inject another level of canon into the discussion.” (Ridderbos and Sawyer).
- B. The challenge of a “Scripture alone” canon for canonicity
1. A Scripture alone epistemology seems to require a Scripture alone defense of the canon.
 - **The Bible is the only authoritative, infallible revelation from God*
 - **The self-authenticating nature of Scripture*
 - **The main message of the Bible is clear and self-contained (perspicuity)*
 - **Scripture interprets Scripture*
 2. The typical tests may or may not be biblical. If they are not, then there is a canon, outside of the canon, used to determine canonicity.
It may be a case of submitting the absolute authority of canonical Scripture to a relative canon based on history and human reason.
 3. Can a Scripture alone approach to canonicity work?
- C. A Scripture Alone determination of canonicity
Ridderbos is a must read on some of these points!
1. The revelation of Jesus Christ, and that revelation mediately through His apostles, is ultimately the canon or standard for both OT and NT.
 2. The content of this revelation is a fixed body of truth

(see I. D. 3; cf inspiration)

Apostolic deposit

The pattern/standard of sound words -

That which is to be guarded and kept

That which is delivered and received –

That by which all the rest is to be judged

Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 11:3, 23; 15:3; Col. 2:6-7; 2 Thess. 2:15; 1

Tim. 6:3-6, 20; 2 Tim. 13-14; 2:2; 4:3; Titus 1:9; Jude 3

3. The structure of the revelation of redemptive-history strongly implies finality; finality implies a completed standard of truth. (see Ridderbos)
4. The witness of the Spirit in the canonical Scriptures to the church.
E.g., 1 Thess. 1:5-6; 2:13; Acts 17:11
The Spirit witnesses to and authenticates the Word (both oral apostolic tradition and then its inscripturated form).

*The self-authenticating Scripture is co-extensive with the canon, and that canon was preserved by Providence, Providence “forced it on the church,” and we accept that by faith. *interesting to observe the writings of the post-apostolic era, although helpful and edifying, did not have “canonical” status.*

Conclusion:

Based on the Christo-centric nature of revelation, the content of revelation, the structure of revelation and the witness of the Spirit to that revelation, received by the Church, we can conclude that the Bible gives us a canon for canonicity. Providence has governed the process, culminating in the church recognizing it and the canon stands as completed and closed.

Resources:

Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 60-70.

M. James Sawyer “Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament”

<http://www.bible.org>

Greg Bahnsen, “The Concept and Importance of Canonicity”

<http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org>

Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963, 1968, 1988).

