

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

There are a number of problems related to the canon of the Scriptures. How do we know what is in the canon of the Scripture? When was the canon of the New Testament established? In addition, how widespread was the dissemination of the New Testament books in the first century?

What is the Canon of the New Testament?

In order to answer the question of “what is the canon” lexical definitions for the Greek word κανων (pronounced *canon*) will be given. Merriam-Webster defines the word canon as: “ruler, rule, model, standard ... an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture.” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition). Thayer defines the Greek word κανων (pronounced *canon*) as: “prop. a rod or straight piece of rounded wood to which any thing is fastened to keep it straight; used for various purposes ... a measuring rod, rule; a carpenter’s line or measuring tape.” (Thayer, page 324).

Another way to define words is to consider how the word is employed in the Scriptures. The Greek word κανων is used in: II Corinthians 10:13, 15, and 16 (translated province in the ASV [footnote ASV = limit Gr. measuring-rod]). This word is also found in Galatians 6:16 and Philippians 3:16 (translated “rule”).

Errors Concerning the Canon

There are several errors concerning the canon in the religious world. The first error is that the canon was established slowly over a period of time (taking perhaps several hundred years for the canon to be established). This is probably the most common error on this subject.

The second error was that the canon was determined by a group of men who lived long after the age of miracles. This is essentially the doctrine taught by the Roman Catholic Church.¹ This is one of the basic arguments made by the Roman Catholic Church to prove that the R. C. Church speaks authoritatively. (*If the R. C. Church established the canon, then the R. C. Church speaks authoritatively*).

How Was the Canon Established?

God granted miraculous gifts to enable the church to detect false prophets and false doctrine. One of the gifts was “discerning of spirits” (I Corinthians 12:10, 14:29, I John 4:1, etc.). In addition, prophets were commanded to use their gift to determine if a written document was Scripture (I Corinthians 14:37). The church obeyed I Corinthians 14:37 and accepted the I Corinthian epistle (II Corinthians 1:12-14). The church at Thessalonica accepted Paul’s writings as the Word of God (I Thessalonians 2:13).

The following argument establishes this author’s contention that the canon of the Scripture was

¹ One difference is that the Roman Catholic Church claims that miracles continue today.

established in the first century:

If a prophet was commanded to determine if a document was Scripture, then it was their duty to do this.

If it was their duty, then all the prophets established the canonicity of the Scriptures.

The apostles quoted Scripture and stated that it was Scripture. Paul quoted Deuteronomy 25:4, Matthew 10:9-10, and Luke 10:7 in I Timothy 5:18. Peter stated that the writings of Paul were Scripture (II Peter 3:15-16). Since God does not do anything that is unnecessary, it is evident that it was necessary to tell the church that these passages and books are Scripture. Establishing that a book is Scripture is tantamount to establishing that it is part of the canon.

It is a sin to reject the canonicity of any part of the Scriptures (III John 9). It is a sin to accept any false doctrine as Scripture (Galatians 1:6-9). A just God would naturally give sufficient evidence for people to know what was part of the canon in order to keep from sinning. The following hypothetical syllogism clarifies this argument:

If God is just and it is a sin to either reject the canonicity of part of the Scriptures or it is a sin to claim canonicity for a non-inspired book, then God provided the early church with evidence for the canonicity of the New Testament books.

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God provided the early church with evidence for the canonicity of the New Testament books.

The canon of the New Testament was established by the miraculous gifts of the first century. The apostles, New Testament prophets, and those with the gift of discerning of spirits established the canon of the New Testament.

How Do We Establish the Canon Today?

The Old Testament Scriptures serve as a pattern for us today (I Corinthians 10:11, 13, Romans 15:4, etc.). The Old Testament saints were given instructions on how to determine what was from God and what was not from God. Moses instructed the Children of Israel that (1) they must reject any prophet who taught anything contrary to what was in the Scriptures they already accepted (Deuteronomy 13:1-18) and (2) there must be miraculous evidence that a prophet was a true prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15-22). These rules would apply equally to what a person spoke or wrote which they claimed to be from God (inspired of God). Once a book was confirmed there is no evidence that another prophet ever reconfirmed a message from an earlier prophet. If a man's covenant needs only one confirmation, then God's covenant (a greater covenant) needs only one confirmation (Galatians 3:15).

From the Old Testament two principles are derived for modern mankind: (1) no book is to be accepted as canonical that contradicts anything in other books that are canonical and (2) there must be internal evidence (of a miraculous nature) to establish that the book is from God. This would include such things as scientific foreknowledge, prophecy (foretelling the future), a true prophet stating that it is

Scripture, etc.

How Were the Early Copies of the New Testament Disseminated?

It was part of the work of the church to make copies of the Scriptures. Jesus sent forth scribes (Matthew 23:34). The apostles used scribes to copy their writings (Romans 16:22 and I Peter 5:12). Silvanus is another name for Silas, who was a prophet (Acts 15:32). God would not allow His prophets to make mistakes in anything that related to teaching of His Word (cf. Baalam - Numbers 20-22). It is inconceivable that an inspired scribe would make a copyist error.

The churches made copies of the books of the New Testament. The church copied portions of the Scriptures (Acts 15:23 and 30). The church at Colossae made a copy for the church at Laodicea (Colossians 4:16). It was common practice for the church to exchange their epistles (Colossians 4:16, II Thessalonians 2:15, and 3:14).

The *a fortiori* principle demonstrates that God provided copies of the Scriptures to the church. If God provided food for the birds (Matthew 6:25-34), then He will provide spiritual food for people (I Peter 2:1-3). Surely John provided copies of the Book of Revelation to each of the seven churches of Asia (Revelation 1:4). Surely Paul provided copies of the book of Galatians to each of the churches in Galatia (Galatians 1:2). God provided the Scriptures by means of inspired scribes who made copies without any textual variants during the age of miracles.

The early church had miraculously guided teachers (I Corinthians 12:28-31 and Ephesians 4:11). A teacher takes a copy of the Scriptures and expounds them to the students. It is inconceivable that a miraculously guided teacher would teach from a copy of the Greek New Testament which was defective without correcting it! It is obvious that these miraculously guided men and women would not allow textual variants in the copies of the Scriptures they used. Therefore, it is evident that there were thousands of totally correct copies of the 27 New Testament books in the first century.

Summary

The New Testament canon was established by the miraculous gifts of the first century. The modern canon is established by considering the internal evidence in the books. Internal evidence is of three types. The first type of evidence is internal consistency with other canonical books. The second type of evidence is supernatural evidence (foreknowledge etc.). The third type of evidence is a statement by a prophet that a certain book was Scripture.

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