

## Theology in Thirty The Canon of Scripture

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers”—1 Thessalonians 2:13

### **I. The Nature of Canonicity?**

Canon comes from the greek word *kanon*, which means measuring rod or stick. In the Bible, canon means rule or standard. So the canon of scripture refers to the recognized list of books that believers accept as the word of God. For us as Protestant Christians, the canon is the 66 books of the Bible; 39 OT books, and 27 NT books. Grudem: “The canon of Scripture is the list of all books that belong in the Bible.”

The canon is the recognition of God’s word not the determination of God’s word. When the early church affirmed the canon, they were not: *declaring, creating, and determining* which scriptures were to become God’s word. Instead they were: *discovering, recognizing, and accepting* which scriptures were already God’s word.

### **II. The Tests of Canonicity**

#### **1) Apostolic Authority**

Divine scripture had to be written by an apostle or an associate of an apostle. Most NT books were written by apostles themselves. But a few were not: Mark, Luke-Acts, Jude, possibly Hebrews. Yet these books were still considered canon because of their close association with the apostles.

Grudem: “If a writing can be shown to be by an apostle, then its absolute divine authority is automatically established.”

Jesus commissioned the apostles and gave them authority to bear witness to the truth. John 14:25-26- “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” John 15:26-27- “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. 27 And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.”

The apostles saw their own writings as authoritative. John tells us that he wrote revelation based on the things that were revealed to him about Jesus Christ from God (Rev 1:1)/ Paul commonly states that his writings are the very commandments of the Lord (1 Cor 14:37; 2 Thess 3:14-15)

The apostles also affirmed other apostles’ writings as authoritative. Paul puts Luke on the same level as Deuteronomy when he quotes them side by side calling them both Scripture (1 Tim 5:18)/ Peter tells his readers that Paul’s writings were hard to understand, but they were still on the same level as other scriptures (2 Pet 3:16)

The apostles ensured that subsequent generations would see their writings as having divine authority. Jude 3: “Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I

found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

## **2) Internal Consistency**

Divine scripture had to be consistent with the other writings in the canon. Since God is perfect and cannot lie, his words must also be truthful and coherent. If any scripture contradicted the testimony of God then the church did not regard it as canon.

Grudem on the Shepherd of Hermas: “the necessity of penance, the possibility of forgiveness of sins at least once after baptism...the author seems to identify the Holy Spirit with the Son of God before the incarnation and to hold that the Trinity came into existence only after the humanity of Christ had been taken up into heaven.”

Gospel of Thomas: “Simon Peter said to them: ‘Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of life.’ Jesus said: “Lo, I shall lead her, so that I may make her a male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

## **3) Divine Beauty**

If the scripture is the word of God, then it must reflect his character, beauty, and majesty

John Calvin: “It is easy to see that the Sacred Scriptures, which so far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavor, breathe something divine.”

“Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.”

Some marks of divine beauty: The Bible mixes together history and poetry and prophecy in an exalted style that elevates God and brings down man. The Bible is logical and coherent and profound (2 tim 3:16). The Bible pierces our hearts and moves us to action (Heb 4:12). The Bible contains truth that connects with the human soul (Lk 24:32)

Origen: “it is filled with the healthful words of heavenly grace” speaking of the book of Jude

Calvin: “clearly is crammed with thoughts that could not be humanly conceived.”

## **4) Corporate Receptivity**

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27)

Roger Nicole: “the witness of the Holy Spirit given corporately to God’s people and made manifest by a nearly unanimous acceptance of the NT canon in the Christian churches.”

Adapted from Busenitz/Pettegrew, three periods of corporate receptivity:

1. The Period of separate circulation (70–170)

Clement of Rome (c. AD 96) mentions at least eight New Testament books in his epistles, Ignatius of Antioch cites about seven books (c. AD 106); Polycarp mentions about 15 (c. AD 140). Irenaeus (AD 185) mentions 21 Hippolytus (AD 170-235, mentions 22.

During this time the books which were questioned but not excluded were Hebrews (unknown author), James, 2 Peter, 2, 3 John, Revelation.

## 2. Period of separation, the issue at this time is extent (170–303)

During this period various collections are coming together. The issue is which writings were to be excluded. Marcion (AD 140) stimulates identification because of his false canon; the Edict of Diocletian does as well. The Muratorian Canon (AD. 170) is the earliest known collection excluding only Hebrews, James, and 1, 2 Peter. Irenaeus (AD 185) mentions 21 books, Hippolytus (AD 170-235), mentions 22. The Old Syriac version excludes 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude and Revelation, and the Old Latin (AD 200) excludes 1, 2 Peter, James, and Hebrews.

## 3. Period of completion (303–397)

During this period the formal acceptance and recognition takes place. Council of Laodicea (AD 363) mentions the present collection of 27; Athanasius mentions 27 in his Easter letter of AD 367 and these are the recognized canon at the local Council of Hippo (AD 393) and the Third Synod of Carthage (AD 397).

Grudem: “God’s faithfulness to his people convinces us that there is nothing missing from Scripture that God thinks we need to know for obeying him and trusting him fully. The canon of Scripture today is exactly what God wanted it to be and it will stay that way until Christ returns.”