

Sunday, September 16, 2018— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 58 The Concept of Canonicity

### **Concept of Canonicity**

- “Canonization is a word used to describe the process of determining which books ought to be included in the Bible and which books should not be included.” (Taylor, 75)
- Information on the etymological origin of the word canon varies by source. According to Mark Noll, the word “canon” is derived from a Greek word borrowed from the Phoenicians meaning a rod or ruler for measuring objects. (Noll, 34)
- Meanwhile, James Taylor informs his readers that the word Canon is derived from the Greek word “*kanon*” which answers to the Hebrew word “*qaneh*.” In the Old Testament the Hebrew word is translated “reed” and is used to reference a measuring stick.
  - Ezekiel 40:3— “a measuring reed”
  - Ezekiel 41:5-8
  - Ezekiel 42:16-19
- In these passages, the measuring reed served as the standard by which accurate measurements were calculated for building purposes. If there was no agreed upon standard as to the dimensions of a measuring reed, construction would have been difficult indeed. The word could also be used as a standard for judging whether or not something was straight. (Shelley, 58)
- The literal concept of a measuring reed served as the basis for the word’s later New Testament usage which came to denote a rule or standard.
  - II Corinthians 10:13-15
  - Galatians 6:16
  - Philippians 3:16
- These New Testament texts imply a rule, standard, or measure by which believers are to walk. Soon, “the idea was transferred to a list of books that constituted the standard or “rule” of the churches. These were the books read publicly in the congregations because they had the special authority of God upon them.” (Shelley, 58)
- “The first recorded use of the word for the authoritative list of books in the bible came in the year 367 from Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in North Africa.” (Noll, 34) Regarding the list of Athanasius, Dr. Jim Taylor adds:
  - “The early Christians used the “canon” to describe their rule of faith or the authoritative nature of the scriptures. But the first concrete application of the word as it refers to the

Bible was made by Athanasius in 350 AD. He wrote in his 39<sup>th</sup> Festal Epistle of Athanasius concerning the 27 books of the New Testament while at the same time, he referred to the Apocrypha as being heretical. He also mentioned that it was acceptable to read the Didache and the Shepard of Hermas but that even these should not be considered a part of the canon of scripture.” (Taylor, 76)

- The conflict over which writings were truly authoritative can be seen while Paul and the other New Testament writers were still alive.
  - II Thessalonians 2:2—people were forging letters as from Paul while he was still alive.
  - Colossians 4:16—unclear what epistle Paul is referring to.
  - I Corinthians 5:9—not every letter Paul wrote was written under inspiration. Therefore, not everything Paul wrote was inspired scripture.
- In summation, canonicity deals with determining which books were inspired scripture and which books were not.

### **Old Testament Precedent for a New Testament Canon**

- Finding its roots in the mind of the same God who formed the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the body of Christ in the New Testament was never without a canon from the standpoint that they possessed the Old Testament.
  - Romans 2:17-18
  - Romans 3:1-2
- The Old Testament canon had been fixed years before the birth of Christ in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. In Luke 24:44, Jesus Christ identifies the canon of Old Testament Scripture. Therefore, through the pen of Luke, we have an inspired identification of the Jewish Old Testament canon at the time of Christ.

<b>The Law (<i>Torah</i>)</b>	<b>The Prophets (<i>Neviim</i>)</b>	<b>The Psalms (<i>K'thuvim</i>)</b>
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs
Leviticus	Samuel	Job
Numbers	Kings	Song of Songs
Deuteronomy	Isaiah	Ruth
	Jeremiah	Lamentations
	Ezekiel	Ecclesiastes
	The Twelve (Minor Prophets)	Esther
		Daniel
		Ezra
		Nehemiah
		Chronicles

- Christians in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire (Byzantium) rejected the canonicity of the fifteen Old Testament Apocryphal books. In contrast, Western Christians under the influence of Augustine received the Apocrypha as part of the Canon. (Shelley, 60) These differences still exist today between Catholics and Protestants.
- By seeking an authoritative collection of books, the New Testament Church affirmed its connection to Judaism by holding to a select list of sacred books. At the same time, the early Christians broke with their Jewish predecessors by claiming that the Hebrew Scriptures were incomplete in themselves without the addition of the New Testament. (Noll, 34)
- In practical terms, there are many reasons why a collection of authoritative books would have been necessary in the early church.
  - Standards of worship, prayer, and preaching
  - Reading material for public services and private study
  - Theological standard to use in responding to non-Christian critics
  - Deciding doctrinal disputes within their own ranks
  - Text to translate God's Word into the various languages of the Greco-Roman world (Noll, 34)

### **Marcion and the Traditional View of the Canon**

- In church history books, any discussion on the formation of the New Testament canon will include a conversation about Marcion. Church history portrays Marcion as the catalyst for the early church to officially identify which New Testament books were authoritative canon and which ones were not.
- The following is a summation of the standard account of Marcion as found in virtually all (most) church history books:
  - Marcion was the son of a Bishop from a town on the southern coast of the Black Sea. As a young man Marcion became a ship owner, sailing passengers and cargo throughout the Roman world. During his travels Marcion supposedly developed distaste for the physical world and fell under the spell of a Gnostic teacher named Credo. (Jones, 24)
  - Around 140, Marcion's father's church excluded the young ship-owner from fellowship. Some sources report that Marcion had seduced an unmarried girl in his father's church. While this is possible, the real reason for Marcion's banishment is probably related to his new belief system. (Jones, 24)
  - Credo is said to have believed that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament, he said, was

unknowable; the Christian God had been revealed. The Old Testament God was sheer justice; whereas the God of the New Covenant was loving and gracious. (Shelley, 62)

- After being banished from his father's Church, Marcion fled to Rome where he further developed his ideas. While Marcion can never rightly be called a full-fledged Gnostic, he did borrow from Gnostic thought. (Jones, 24) Borrowing from Credo, Marcion held that the Old Testament God was full of wrath and the author of evil. This God, he said, was only concerned for the Jewish people. He was prepared to destroy all other people. In contrast, the Christian's God was a God of grace and love for all who disclosed himself in Jesus Christ, his Son. (Shelley, 62)
- Because he believed that the God of the Old Testament loved the Jews exclusively, Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and also those New Testament writings that he thought favored Jewish readers—for example Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Hebrews. He also rejected other Christian writings that appeared to compromise his own views, including 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. (Shelley, 63)
- In the end Marcion's Bible contained an altered version of Luke and ten letters of Paul. "The Apostle of the Gentiles, it seems, was the only apostle who did not corrupt the gospel of Jesus." (Shelley, 63)
- In 144, the church in Rome excommunicated Marcion at which time he established some of his own churches in Italy and Asia Minor. (Jones, 25)
- Marcion was condemned as a heretic largely on account of his alleged view of the Apostle Paul.
  - Writing around 180 AD Irenaeus states the following regarding Marcion's beliefs, "with regard to those who allege that Paul alone knew the truth and that to him the mystery was manifest by revelation, let Paul convict himself." (Bercot, 419)
  - Bruce A. Shelley, author of *Church History in Plain Language* reports the following regarding Marcion's view of the Apostle Paul:
    - "Marcions's worship of Paul was little short of idolatry. As he saw it, Paul was the great enemy of the law and the great spokesman for the gospel. He was in fact the supreme figure in the church. Marcion believed Christ had descended from heaven twice, once to suffer and to die, and once to call Paul and to reveal to Paul the true significance of his death. In heaven, said Marcion, Paul sits at the right hand of Christ, who sits on the right hand of God.

As the North African lawyer Tertullian put it, Paul had become the apostle of the heretics." (Shelley, 63)
- In my view, we need to be very careful when passing judgment on Marcion. The things the church fathers say about Marcion are very similar to the things our critics say about us (mid-Acts, Pauline Grace Believers): we worship Paul, we do not use the entire Bible, we cut and mutilate the Bible, etc.

- If Marcion truly believed in two different Gods and used a Bible that excluded the Old Testament and much of the New, then Marcion was a heretic. However, I am not sure we can trust the testimony of men who we know were heretical when their teachings are compared with the writings of Paul.
- According to church history, Marcion was not excommunicated as a heretic until 144 AD. If his alleged heretical teachings were the impetus for the formation of the New Testament Canon as has been asserted then, by implication, there was no notion of canonicity among believers until the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. This position fails for a host of reasons that we will be considering throughout our study of canonicity. For the time being, it is unscriptural to think that the Holy Spirit's witness to the body of Christ along with the functioning of the New Testament prophets had not identified for the church which books were inspired or canonical and which were not.
- The Marcion Model of Canonicity fails because it assumes that it is the job of a specific group or church to determine the borders of the canon.
- Most church history books offer some variation of the following three points as the criteria the early church used in determining the canonicity of disputed books.
  - *Is the book reliably connected to an apostle?*
    - The logic behind this question was simple: The people most likely to tell the truth about Jesus were either eyewitnesses who had encountered Jesus personally or close associates of these witnesses.
  - *Do churches throughout the known world value this writing?*
  - *Does the writing agree with what we already know about God?* (Jones, 26-27)
- When one uses these criteria to determine the authenticity of New Testament books, three groups of books emerge that deserve further explanation.
- *Disputed Books*—of the 27 books of the New Testament seven were disputed and these could not be admitted to the canon until later. These books include:
  - Hebrews, James, II Peter, II and III John, Jude, and Revelation
  - Church historians lead their readers to believe that the majority of Bible-believing Christians “disputed” them because four or five “church fathers” do not quote them.
- *Pseudepigrapha*—refers to those books that were never admitted into the New Testament canon. They are currently published in a book called *The Lost Books of the Bible* and include writings such as:
  - New Testament Apocrypha

- Epistle of Barnabas (70-79 AD)
- The Epistle to the Corinthians (96 AD)
- The Gospel According to Hebrews (65-100 AD)
- The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (108 AD)
- The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve) (100-120 AD)
- The Seven Epistles of Ignatius (110 AD)
- Second Epistle of Clement (120-140 AD)
- Shepard of Hermas (115-140 AD)
- Apocalypse of Peter (150 AD)
- Epistle to the Laodiceans (4th Century)
- Pseudepigrapha (False Writings)
  - The Acts of Andrew
  - The Apocalypse of Paul
  - The Epistle of Judas
  - Gospel of Peter
  - Gospel of Thomas
  - The Apocalypse of Paul
  - The Acts of Thaddeus
  - The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary
  - The Gospel of Nicodemus (Giesler, 536)
- It is important to note that Codex Sinaiticus which was utilized by the 1881 Revision Committee to “correct” the KJV in over 5,000 places contains New Testament Apocryphal books (Epistle of Barnabas & Shepard of Hermas). Likewise, Codex Vaticanus as well as Codex Sinaiticus contain Old Testament Apocrypha as part of their respective Old Testament texts.

- *Homologoumena*—is the academic term used by church historians to indicate the 27 New Testament books that were accepted into the Canon of Scripture.
- Church tradition teaches that the canon was finalized at the Council of Carthage in 397 AD. Bible believers should outrightly reject this notion. The Council of Carthage was forced to recognize what God the Holy Spirit had already established and born witness to 27 inspired books.
- While the Old Testament was formed into a canon and preserved by an official priestly class (Tribe of Levi) of the nation of Israel, the New Testament knows no priesthood except the priesthood of all believers. Therefore, any book written and preserved by New Testament Christians would be unofficial and subject to the universal acceptance of the body of Christ, apart from any ecclesiastical tribunal or council. Consequently, church historians have inserted into the real history of the early church the Catholic fiction of an official guardian of the canon.

## Conclusion

- “The subject of canonicity is important to us because it explains how the various writings of the Bible received their relevance. In other words, how did the 66 books now contained in the Bible get there? . . . Keep in mind that inspiration describes the process by which God recorded His words for man. But preservation describes the act of God in keeping every word that He inspired to every generation from the time He gave them until now. Because of this, an understanding of the process of canonization is crucial.” (Taylor, 76)
- I Corinthians 5:9—have we lost part of God’s inspired words? No, the viewpoint of faith would suggest that God did not preserve them because they were not inspired. Since we know that God has promised to preserve His word, and we do not have the letter that Paul is referring to in I Corinthians 5:9 in our present canon, then we must conclude that it was not received as part of the word of God.
  - “. . . since God preserved his word, it is not possible that a true writing of the apostles could ever be “found” and consequently included in the scriptures since no part of the scriptures can ever be lost. So even if we were to find manuscripts signed by Peter or Paul, we would have to conclude, based upon the doctrine of preservation, that they were not inspired!” (Taylor, 77)
- Starting next week in Lesson 59 we will begin looking at three different models for explaining how the canon was recognized.
  - Canon as Community Determined
  - Canon as Historically Determined
  - Canon as Self-Authenticating

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