

The Canonicity of the Bible—Part Three

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Applying Principles of Canonicity. Lest the impression be given that these principles were explicitly and mechanically applied by some commission, some explanation is needed. Just how did the principles operate in the consciousness of the early Christian church? Although the issue of the discovery of the canon center about the Old and New Testaments alike, J. N. D. Kelly discusses these principles as they apply to the New Testament canon. He writes,

The main point to be observed is that the fixation of the finally agreed list of books, and of the order in which they were to be arranged, was the result of a very gradual process... Three features of this process should be noted. First, the criterion which ultimately came to prevail was apostolicity. Unless a book could be shown to come from the pen of an apostle, or at least to have the authority of an apostle behind it, it was peremptorily rejected, however edifying or popular with the faithful it might be. Secondly, there were certain books which hovered for a long time on the fringe of the canon, but in the end failed to secure admission to it, usually because they lacked this indisputable stamp.... Thirdly, some of the books which were later included had to wait a considerable time before achieving universal recognition.... By gradual stages, however, the Church both in East and West arrived at a common mind as to its sacred books. The first official document which prescribes the twenty-seven books of our new Testament as alone canonical is Athanasius's Easter letter for the year 367, but the process was not everywhere complete until at least a century and a half later. [Kelly, 59-60]

Some Principles Are Implicit While Others Are Explicit. All criteria of inspiration are necessary to demonstrate the canonicity of each book. The five characteristics must at least be implicitly present, though some of them are more dominant than others. For example, the dynamic equipping power of God is more obvious in the New Testament Epistles than in the Old Testament historical narratives. "Thus-says-the-Lord" authority is more apparent in the Prophets than in the poetry. That is not to say that authority isn't in the poetic sections, nor a dynamic in the redemptive history. It does mean the Fathers did not always find all of the principles explicitly operating.

Some Principles Are More Important Than Others. Some criteria of inspiration are more important than are others, in that the presence of one implies another, or is a key to others. For example, if a book is authoritatively from God, it will be dynamic—accompanied by God's transforming power. In fact, when authority was unmistakably present, the other characteristics of inspiration were automatically assumed. Among New Testament books the proof of apostolicity, its prophetic nature, was often considered a guarantee of inspiration (Warfield, 415). If propheticity could be verified, this alone established the book. Generally speaking, the church Fathers were only explicitly concerned with apostolicity and authenticity. The edifying characteristics and universal acceptance of a book were assumed unless some doubt from the latter two questions forced a reexamination of the tests.

This happened with 2 Peter and 2 John. Positive evidence for the first three principles emerged victorious.

The witness of the Holy Spirit. The recognition of canonicity was not a mere mechanical matter settled by a synod or ecclesiastical council. It was a providential process directed by the Spirit of God as he witnessed to the church about the reality of the Word of God. People could not identify the Word until the Holy Spirit opened their understanding. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27). This is not to say that the Holy Spirit mystically spoke in visions to settle questions of canonicity. The witness of the Spirit convinced them of the reality that a God-breathed canon existed, not its extent (Sproul, 337-54). Faith joined science; objective principles were used, but the Fathers knew what writings had been used in their churches to change lives and teach hearts by the Holy Spirit. This subjective testimony joined the objective evidence in confirming what was God's Word.

Tests for canonicity were not mechanical means to measure the amount of inspired literature, nor did the Holy Spirit say, "This book or passage is inspired; that one is not." That would be disclosure, not discovery. The Holy Spirit providentially guided the examination process and gave witness to the people as they read or heard.

Conclusion. It is important to distinguish between the *determination* and the *discovery* of canonicity. God is solely responsible for determining; God's people are responsible for discovery. That a book is canonical is due to divine *inspiration*. How it is known to be canonical is due to a process of human recognition. Was a book (1) written by a spokesperson for God, (2) who was confirmed by an act of God, (3) told the truth (4) in the power of God and (5) was accepted by the people of God? If a book clearly had the first mark, canonicity was often assumed. Contemporaries of a prophet or apostle made the initial confirmation. Later church Fathers sorted out the profusion of religious literature to officially recognize what books were divinely inspired in the manner of which Paul speaks in 2 Timothy 3:16.

Sources

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