

The Canonicity of the Bible—Part Two

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[Last time we discussed the first three of what Dr. Geisler called “foundational questions” to discovering canonicity: 1.) Was the book written by a prophet of God? 2.) Was the writer confirmed by acts of God? and 3.) Does the message tell the truth about God? We now continue with number 4.]

[4] *Did it come with the power of God?* Another test for canonicity is a book’s power to edify and equip believers. This requires the power of God. The Fathers believed the Word of God to be “living and active” (Heb. 4:12) and consequently ought to have a transforming force (2 Tim. 3:17; 1 Peter 1:23). If the message of a book did not affect its stated goal, if it did not have the power to change a life, then God was apparently not behind its message. A message of God would certainly be backed by the *might of God*. The Fathers believed that the Word of God accomplishes its purpose (Isa. 55:11).

Paul applied this principle to the Old Testament when he wrote to Timothy, “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15 KJV). If it is of God, it will work—it will come to pass. This simple test was given by Moses to try the truth of a prophet’s prediction (Deut. 18:20 ff). If what was foretold did not materialize, it was not from God.

On this basis, heretical literature and good noncanonical apostolic literature was rejected from the canon. Even those books whose teaching was spiritual, but whose message was at best only devotional, were deemed noncanonical. Such is the case for most literature written in the apostolic and subapostolic periods. There is a tremendous difference between the canonical books of the New Testament and other religious writings of the apostolic period. “There is not the same freshness and originality, depth and clearness. And this is no wonder; for it means the transition from truth given by infallible inspiration to truth produced by fallible pioneers” (Berkhof, 42). The noncanonical books lacked power; they were devoid of the dynamic aspects found in inspired Scripture. They did not come with the power of God.

Books whose edifying power was questioned included Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) and Ecclesiastes. Could a book that is erotically sensual or skeptical be from God? Obviously not; as long as these books were thought of in that manner, they could not be considered canonical. Eventually, the messages of these books were seen as spiritual, so the books themselves were accepted. The principle, nevertheless, was applied impartially. Some books passed the test; others failed. No book that lacked essential edificational or practical characteristics was considered canonical.

[5] *Was it accepted by the people of God?* A prophet of God was confirmed by an act of God (miracle) and was recognized as a spokesman by the people who received the message. Thus, the seal of canonicity depended on whether the book was accepted by the people. This does not mean that everybody in the community to which the prophetic message was addressed accepted it as divinely authoritative. Prophets (1 Kings 17-19; 2

Chron. 36:11-16) and apostles (Galatians 1) were rejected by some. However, believers in the prophet's community acknowledged the prophetic nature of the message, as did other contemporary believers familiar with the prophet. This acceptance had two stages: initial acceptance and subsequent recognition.

Initial acceptance of a book by the people to whom it was addressed was crucial. Paul said of the Thessalonians, "We also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). Whatever subsequent debate there may have been about a book's place, the people in the best position to know its prophetic credentials were those who knew the writer. The definitive evidence is that which attests acceptance by contemporary believers.

There is ample evidence that books were immediately accepted into the canon. Moses' books were immediately placed with the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:26). Joshua's writing was added (Josh. 24:26). Following were books by Samuel and others (1 Sam. 10:25). Daniel had a copy of Moses and the Prophets, which included the book of his contemporary Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2, 10-11). Paul quoted the Gospel of Luke as "Scripture" (1 Tim. 5:18). Peter had a collection of Paul's "letters" (2 Peter 3:16). Indeed, the apostles exhorted that their letters be read and circulated among the churches (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; Rev. 1:3).

Some have argued that Proverbs 25:1 shows an exception. It suggests that some of Solomon's proverbs may not have been collected into the canon during his lifetime. Rather, "the men of Hezekiah... transcribed" more of Solomon's proverbs. It is possible that these additional proverbs (chaps. 25-29) were not officially presented to the believing community during Solomon's life, perhaps because of his later moral decline. However, since they were *authentic* Solomonic proverbs there was no reason not to later present and at that time immediately accept them as authoritative. In this case Proverbs 25-29 would not be an exception to the canonic rule of immediate acceptance.

It is also possible that these later chapters of Proverbs were presented and accepted as authoritative during Solomon's lifetime. Support for this view can be derived from the fact that the Solomonic part of the book may have been compiled in three sections, which begin at 1:1, 10:1, and 25:1. Perhaps these were preserved on separate scrolls. The word *also* in Proverbs 25:1 can refer to the fact that Hezekiah's men also copied this last section (scroll) along with the first two sections (scrolls). All three scrolls would have been immediately accepted as divinely authoritative and were only copied afresh by the scholars.

Since Scripture of every time period is referred to in later biblical writings, and each book is quoted by some early church Father or listed in some canon, there is ample evidence that there was continuing agreement within the covenant community concerning the canon. That certain books were written by prophets in biblical times and are in the canon now argues for their canonicity. Along with evidence for a continuity of belief, this argues strongly that the idea of canonicity existed from the beginning. The presence of a book in the canon down through the centuries is evidence that it was known by the contemporaries of the prophet who wrote it to be genuine and authoritative, despite the fact that succeeding generations lacked definitive knowledge of the author's prophetic credentials.

Later debate about certain books should not cloud their initial acceptance by immediate contemporaries of the prophets. True canonicity was *determined* by God when he directed the prophet to write it, and it was immediately *discovered* by the people addressed.

Technically speaking, the discussion about certain books in later centuries was not a question of *canonicity* but of *authenticity* or *genuineness*. Because later readers had neither access to the writer nor direct evidence of supernatural confirmation, they had to rely on historical testimony. Once they were convinced by the evidence that books were written by accredited spokespeople for God, the books were accepted by the church universal. But the decisions of church councils in the fourth and fifth centuries did not determine the canon, nor did they first discover or recognize it. In no sense was the authority of the canonical books contingent upon the late church councils. All the councils did was to give *later, broader, and final* recognition to the facts that God had inspired the books, and the people of God had accepted them.

Several centuries went by before all the books in the canon were recognized. Communication and transportation were slow, so it took longer for the believers in the West to become fully aware of the evidence for books that had circulated first in the East, and vice versa. Prior to 313 the church faced frequent persecution that did not allow leisure for research, reflection, and recognition. As soon as that was possible, it was only a short time before there was general recognition of all canonical books by the regional councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397). There was no great need for precision until a dispute arose. Marcion published his Gnostic canon, with only Luke and ten of Paul's Epistles, in the middle of the second century. Spurious gospels and epistles appeared throughout the second and third centuries. Since those books claimed divine authority, the universal church had to define the limits of God's authentic, inspired canon that already was known.

(to be continued)