

# The Canonicity of the Bible

by Dr. Norman Geisler

*Canonicity* (Fr. *canon*, rule or norm) refers to the normative or authoritative books inspired by God for inclusion in Holy Scripture. Canonicity is determined by God. It is not the antiquity, authenticity, or religious community that makes a book canonical or authoritative. A book is valuable because it is canonical, and not canonical because it is or was considered valuable. Its authority is *established* by God and merely *discovered* by God's people.

## Definition of Canonicity

The distinction between God's determination and human discovery is essential to the correct view of canonicity, and should be drawn carefully:

The Authority Relationship Between Church and Canon	
<b>Incorrect View</b> The church is determiner of the canon. The church is mother of the canon. The church is magistrate of the canon. The church is regulator of the canon. The church is judge of the canon. The church is master of the canon.	<b>Biblical View</b> The church is discoverer of the canon. The church is child of the canon. The church is minister of the canon. The church is recognizer of the canon. The church is witness of the canon. The church is servant of the canon.

In the "Incorrect View" the authority of the Scriptures is based upon the authority of the church; the correct view is that the authority of the church is to be found in the authority of the Scriptures. The incorrect view places the church *over* the canon, whereas the proper position views the church *under* the canon. In fact, if in the column titled "Incorrect View," the word *church* be replaced by God, then the proper view of the canon emerges clearly. It is God who *regulated* the canon; man merely *recognized* the divine authority God gave to it. God *determined* the canon, and man *discovered* it. Louis Gaussen gives an excellent summary of this position:

In this affair, then, the Church is a servant and not a mistress; a depository and not a judge. She exercises the office of a minister not of a magistrate.... She delivers a testimony, not a judicial sentence. She discerns the canon of the Scriptures, she does not make it; she has recognized their authenticity, she has not given it.... The authority of the Scriptures is not founded, then, on the authority of the Church: It is the church that is founded on the authority of the Scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

### **Discovering Canonicity**

Appropriate methods must be employed to discover which books God determined to be canonical. Otherwise, the list of canonical books might be varied and incorrectly identified. Many procedures used in the study of the Old Testament canon have been marred by the use of fallacious methods.

***Inadequate Criteria for Canonicity.*** Five mistaken methods have particularly troubled the church:<sup>2</sup>

1. failure to distinguish a book that was “known” from a book that carried God’s authority;
2. failure to distinguish disagreement about the canon between different parties from uncertainty about the canon within those parties;
3. failure to distinguish between the adding of books to the canon and the removal of books from it;
4. failure to distinguish between the canon that the community recognized and eccentric views of individuals;
5. failure to properly use Jewish evidence about the canon transmitted through Christian hands, either by denying the Jewish origins or by ignoring the Christian medium through which it has come.<sup>3</sup>

### **Principles of Canonicity**

Granted that God gave authority and hence canonicity to the Bible, another question arises: How did believers become aware of what God had done? The accepted canonical books of the Bible themselves refer to other books that are no longer available, for example, the “Book of Jasher” (Josh. 10:13) and “the Book of the Wars of the Lord” (Num. 21:14). Then there are *Apocryphal* books and the so-called “lost books.” How did the Fathers know those were not inspired? Did not John (21:25) and Luke (1:1) speak of a profusion of religious literature? Were there not false epistles (2 Thess. 2:2)? What marks of inspiration guided the Fathers as they identified and collected the inspired books? Perhaps the very fact that some canonical books were doubted at times, on the basis of one principle or another, argues both for the value of the principle and the caution of the Fathers in their recognition of canonicity. It provides assurance that the people of God really included the books God wanted.

Five foundational questions lie at the very heart of the discovery process:

**[1] Was the book written by a prophet of God?**

The basic question was whether a book was prophetic. Propheticity determined canonicity. A prophet was one who declared what God had disclosed. Thus, only the prophetic writings were canonical. Anything not written by a prophet of God was not part of the Word of God. The characteristic words “And the word of the Lord came to the prophet,” or “The Lord said unto,” or “God spoke” so fill the Old Testament that they have become proverbial. If substantiated these claims of inspiration are so clear that it was hardly necessary to discuss whether some books were divine in origin. In most cases it was simply a matter of establishing the authorship of the book. If it was written by a recognized apostle or prophet, its place in the canon was secured.

Historical or stylistic (external or internal) evidence that supports the genuineness of a prophetic book also argues for its canonicity. This was exactly the argument Paul used to defend his harsh words to the Galatians (Gal. 1:1-24). He argued that his message was authoritative because he was an authorized messenger of God, “an apostle not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1). He also turned the tables on his opponents who preached “a different gospel: which is really not another; only... to distort the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6-7). His opponents’ gospel could not be true because they were “false brethren” (Gal. 2:4).

It should be noted in this connection that occasionally the Bible contains true prophecies from individuals whose status as people of God is questionable, such as Balaam (Num. 24:17) and Caiaphas (John 11:49). However, granted that their prophecies were consciously given, these prophets were not writers of Bible books, but were merely quoted by the actual writer. Therefore, their utterances are in the same category as the Greek poets quoted by the apostle Paul (cf. Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12).

The arguments Paul used against the false teachers at Galatia were also used as grounds for rejecting a letter that was forged or written under false pretenses. One such letter is mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2:2. A book cannot be canonical if it is not genuine. A book might use the device of literary impersonation without deception. One writer assumes the role of another for effect. Some scholars feel such is the case in Ecclesiastes, if *Kohleth* wrote autobiographically as though he were Solomon.<sup>4</sup> Such a view is not incompatible with the principle, provided it can be shown to be a literary device and not a moral deception. However, when an author pretends to be an apostle in order to gain acceptance of his ideas, as the writers of many New Testament *Apocryphal* books did, then it is moral deception.

Because of this “prophetic” principle, 2 Peter was disputed in the early church. Even Eusebius in the fourth century said, “But the so-called second Epistle we have not received as canonical, but nevertheless it has appeared useful to many, and has been studied with other Scriptures.”<sup>5</sup> On the basis of differences in the style of writing, it was felt by some that the author of 2 Peter could not be the same as the author of 1 Peter. But 2 Peter claimed to have been written by “Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:1). Thus, the epistle was either a forgery or there was great difficulty in explaining its different

style. Those who were disturbed by such evidence doubted the genuineness of 2 Peter and it was placed among the antilegomena books for a time. It was finally admitted on the grounds that it was Peter's genuine writing. The differences in style can be accounted for by the time lapse, different occasions, and the fact that Peter verbally dictated 1 Peter to an amanuensis (or secretary; see 1 Pet. 5:13).

Inspiration was so certain in many prophetic writings that their inclusion was obvious. Some were rejected because they lacked authority, particularly the pseudepigrapha. These books provided no support for their claim. In many cases the writing is fanciful and magical. This same principle of authority was the reason the book of Esther was doubted, particularly since the name of God is conspicuously absent. Upon closer examination, Esther retained its place in the canon after the Fathers were convinced that authority was present, although less observable.

### **[2] Was the writer confirmed by acts of God?**

A miracle is an act of God to confirm the word of God given through a prophet of God to the people of God. It is the sign to substantiate his sermon; the miracle to confirm his message. Not every prophetic revelation was confirmed by a specific miracle. There were other ways to determine the authenticity of an alleged prophet. If there were questions about one's prophetic credentials it could be settled by divine confirmation, as indeed it was on numerous occasions throughout Scripture (Exodus 4; Numbers 16-17; 1 Kings 18; Mark 2; Acts 5).

There were true and false prophets (Matt. 7:15), so it was necessary to have divine confirmation of the true ones. Moses was given miraculous powers to prove his call (Exod. 4:1-9). Elijah triumphed over the false prophets of Baal by a supernatural act (1 Kings 18). Jesus was attested to by miracles and signs God performed through him (Acts 2:22). As to the apostles' message, "God was also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his own will" (Heb. 2:4). Paul gave testimony of his apostleship to the Corinthians, declaring, "the signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles" (2 Cor. 12:12).

### **[3] Does the message tell the truth about God?**

Only immediate contemporaries had access to the supernatural confirmation of the prophet's message. Other believers in distant places and subsequent times had to depend on other tests. One such test was the *authenticity* of a book. That is, does the book tell the truth about God and his world as known from previous revelations? God cannot contradict himself (2 Cor. 1:17-18), nor can he utter what is false (Heb. 6:18). No book with false claims can be the Word of God. Moses stated the principle about prophets generally that

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that

prophet or that dreamer of dreams. [Deut. 13:1-3]

So any teaching about God contrary to what his people already knew to be true was to be rejected. Furthermore, any predictions made about the world which failed to come true indicated that a prophet's words should be rejected. As Moses said to Israel,

And you may say in your heart, "How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?" When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. [Deut. 18:21-22]

A prophet who made such false claims might be stoned. The Lord said, "The prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in my name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die" (Deut. 18:20). That kind of punishment assured no repeat performance by that prophet, and it gave other prophets pause before they said, "Thus says the Lord."

Truth in itself does not make a book canonical. This is more a test of *inauthenticity* of a book, rather than canonicity. It is a negative test that could eliminate books from the canon. The Bereans used this principle when they searched the Scriptures to see whether Paul's teaching was true (Acts 17:11). If the preaching of the apostle did not accord with the teaching of the Old Testament canon, it could not be of God.

Much of the *Apocrypha* was rejected because it was not authentic. The Jewish Fathers and early Christian Fathers rejected, or considered second-rate, these books because they had historical inaccuracies and even moral incongruities. The Reformers rejected some because of what they considered to be heretical teaching, such as praying for the dead, which 2 Maccabees 12:45 supports. The apostle John strongly urged that all purported "truth" be tested by the known standard before it be received (1 John 4:1-6).

The test of authenticity was the reason James and Jude have been doubted. Some have thought Jude inauthentic because it may quote inauthentic pseudepigraphical books (Jude 9, 14; see Jerome, 4). Martin Luther questioned the canonicity of James because it lacks an obvious focus on the cross. Martin Luther thought the book appeared to teach salvation by works. Careful study has cleared James of these charges, and even Luther came to feel better about them. Historically and uniformly, Jude and James have been vindicated and their canonicity recognized after they have been harmonized with the rest of Scripture.

#### **[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.”<sup>6</sup> 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 evi-

dence 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.

### **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.<sup>7</sup>

***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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> S. R. L. Gaussen, *Theopneustia: The Bible, Its Divine Origin and Inspiration, Deduced from Internal Evidence and the Testimonies of Nature, History, and Science*, rev. ed. (New York: Jennings & Pye, 1867), p. 137.
- <sup>2</sup> See Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 7-8.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> See H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1952), p. 8f..
- <sup>5</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* (Loeb Classical Library), 1:193.
- <sup>6</sup> L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Eerdmans 1979), p. 42.
- <sup>7</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 59-60.
- <sup>8</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1947), p. 415.
- <sup>9</sup> R. C. Sproul, "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit," in N. L. Geisler, ed. *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), pp. 337-354.