

*The Bible is a product of man, my dear. Not of God... it has evolved through countless translations, additions and revisions.¹.... **Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code****

Are these the words of Marcion, commenting on his interruption of the four gospels? Regretfully they are far more contemporary, the work of Dan Brown in his novel *The Da Vinci Code*. This novel has become a nation wide best seller that is slated to soon become a major motion picture starring Tom Hanks. *The Da Vinci Code* casts much of the New Testament Gospels as compromised and at best on par with Gnostic gospels such as *The Gospel of Phillip* and *the Gospel of Thomas*. The Gnostics were particularly concerned with their perception of differences between the angry God of the Old Testament and the compassionate Jesus of the New Testament. This attack is very different from that of “The Jesus Seminar”² and its historical-critical approach to the gospels. This “novel idea” is very effective at calling into question the validity of scripture as Scripture. Though not as scholarly as the Jesus Seminar, it certainly plays to a much larger audience. Thus the issue of the canon of the New Testament is as contemporary to today’s church as it was to Justin Martyr’s.³

What is a canon and who gets to choose?

¹ The Da Vinci Code page 231

² The Jesus Seminar, founded in 1985 by Robert W. Funk is one of the leading voices of biblical criticism. They conclude only 18% of Jesus sayings are true, they essentially devalue anything that proves deity, encourages evangelism or moral living, see only one statement in Mark being historical 12:17 “render to Caesar” They generally value other non-canonical writings as equal in historical value to the accepted New Testament texts.

³ Justin Martyr was an early Church Father of the early second century. A brilliant Greek philosopher, Justin founded a school in Rome and defended of Christianity against Crescens, a cynic. Justin Martyr was killed in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the emperor depicted in the movie *Gladiator*.

At the root of belief lies the need to know what to believe. It is the purpose of the canon to segregate those works that represent God's will from those that do not. The term canon "is derived from a Hebrew and Greek word denoting a reed or cane. Hence (thus) it means something straight or something to keep straight; and hence (therefore) also a rule or something ruled or measured. It came to be applied to the Scriptures, to denote that they contained the authoritative rule of faith and practice, the standard of doctrine and duty."⁴

At the root of the difficulty in determining the validity and ingredients of the canon is the question, who gets to choose? What standard of authority can represent God in this endeavor? The Old Testament canon had the authority of the priests, seen by an entire people as chosen by God for godly purpose. Early Christianity did not have such an obvious set of leaders to express heavenly endorsement.

The Christian Bible does not claim to have been dropped out of the stars in a completed form to a prophet; there are no golden rocks under which to find a perfect and miraculous text. One cannot read a divine "certificate of authenticity" signed by the members of the trinity. Instead its authority comes from the belief that God spoke through His prophets. While God allowed them to write in the style and grammar they were familiar with, the substance was all God's. The organic nature of that process leaves the Bible texts, in both testaments; open to great scrutiny and criticism. Although trying, this process combines elements of both

⁴ CANON- (from Easton's Bible Dictionary, PC Study Bible formatted electronic database Copyright © 2003 BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

miracle and historical credibility. Although the selection process was very organic, it was not without guidelines.

Major Factors

Just because something is real does not mean it is true. One's first crush in elementary school may feel like true love, sometimes an ear ache is really a tooth ache and *The National Enquirer* although printed on newspaper is not really a newspaper. Although there were many written works produced with a religious purpose in the first hundred years following Christ, not all of them are true in a prophetically revealed sense. Discovering those that were prophetic in nature was the task left to the Church. There are really two tasks when discerning the development of the canon. The first is philosophical: What were the reasons and ideas behind the canon? The second is historical: What were the actual processes and events surrounding its development and acceptance?

Guideline number 1 The Witness of the Spirit

At the heart of the discussion on canonicity is the witness of the Holy Spirit. Without the witness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the person who reads, canonization is a moot point for the reader. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 3:3 *“Clearly, you are a letter from Christ prepared by us. It is written not with pen and ink, but with the Spirit of the living God. It is carved not on stone, but on human hearts.”*⁵ Although the Bible does not depend on belief for legitimacy, it works its purpose in belief (II Timothy 3:14).⁶

⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:3 NLT

⁶ 2 Tim 3:14-17 But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. 15 You have been taught the Holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to

Proving a historical element of a text does not give it authority. Well prepared arguments, historical relics, archeological collaboration and even original manuscripts cannot replace Spirit-led faith in the hearer or reader of God's Word. This is not to say, however that the aforementioned tests are worthless.

God is a communicator and works in ways that although often metaphysical, are very understandable. It is only fair to state early in this paper that I do believe the correct texts were admitted and excluded. I admit that my catalog of knowledge on the subject is very limited. Many people who possess greater knowledge of the early texts would disagree and do so with excellent reasons. Some scholars, whom I find brilliant, would agree with me. That being said, I do not believe my understanding of the canon is “blind” or “mindless”; it is however, grounded as much in faith as in academia.

Guideline number 2 Discovered not selected

The study of the development of a canon is somewhat of a red herring. By its very nature, Scripture is self-asserting. The early church fathers never felt that they were defining a canon; they felt they were simply recognizing the canon. Robert Grant states that the canon was “*not the product of official assemblies or even of the studies of a few theologians. It reflects and expresses the ideal self-understanding of a whole religious movement which, in spite of temporal, geographical, and even ideological differences, could finally be united in*

teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. 17 It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do. NLT

accepting these 27 diverse documents as expressing the meaning of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and to his church.”⁷

This idea was inherited from the Jewish idea of Scripture. The credibility and strength of the Law was the Law; as Karl Barth wrote, “The Bible makes itself to be the canon”⁸ Collaborating support while important does not give the documents authority. John Calvin attests that the strength of scripture’s self-revelation as well as the witness of the Holy Spirit distinguishes the Reformed view of the canon from the Roman Catholic view. The Roman Catholic view is that “the belief that faith in the canon rests on the authority of the Church.”⁹.

Guideline number 3 Apostolic Authority

Far from a blind faith, the quality of self-revelation is in rooted in the distinct qualities of scripture. These qualities are found in the demonstrable basis of apostolic authority. Apostolic authority refers to the witness of those who were chosen by God to experience Christ first-hand. Their authority was recognized whether they wrote or transcribed.

The apostolate was not limited to the initial twelve and Mathias, the replacement of Judas. Paul and Luke are clear examples of this. Herman Ridderbos states, “Thus the apostolate was not distinguished and limited in terms of a number of persons but in there of the nature of its work, which was to establish the church.”¹⁰ Ridderbos further defines the apostolate in saying, “What is apostolic is not limited to the *viva vox* (living voice) of the apostles or to their own writings,

⁷ *Formation of the New Testament* p. 10

⁸ *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* page 9

⁹ *ibid* page 8

¹⁰ *ibid* page 31

but it is also what is apostolic in subject matter and content”¹¹ What is clear is that the qualification of *witness* was limited to those who could report on what they experienced. John 1:14¹², Peter 5:1¹³, and Hebrew 2:3¹⁴ are all examples of the first-hand witness of New Testament writings. Reports based on first hand accounts, then transmitted in written form, share the canon with the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John equally. Benjamin Warfield points out this model in the Gospel of Luke. “It is the Gospel according to Luke, a man who was not an apostle, which Paul parallels in 1 Timothy 5:18 with Deuteronomy as equally “Scripture”.¹⁵

Clearly most New Testament writing is limited to the initial disciples and Paul, and their inclusion in the New Testament canon was never strongly questioned within the Church. Rejecting the apostolic authority of these books would represent an *a priori* critical view of New Testament scripture.

It is clear that much of the transmission of the person and work of Christ was at first an oral tradition. There were also many letters of the apostles that were written to increase the reach of, as well as to encourage or correct the church. As the apostles began to die, the need for a formalized written record of apostolic tradition was clearly needed. John uses the same application to his book that he does to the Old Testament citations sited in John. Paul assumes that his letters

¹¹ Ridderbos p 32

¹² John 1:14 So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. NLT

¹³ 1 Peter 5:1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, NASB

¹⁴ Heb 2:3 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, NASB

¹⁵ The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament page 4

would be read publicly and with authority in I Thessalonians 5:17¹⁶. In 68 A.D. Peter writes of Paul's letters (2 Peter 3:16)¹⁷, as Benjamin Warfield points out "not in contrast with the scriptures, but as among the Scriptures."¹⁸

Guideline number 4- Redemptive Purpose

2 Corinthians 3:6 reads "*He is the one who has enabled us to represent his new covenant. This is a covenant, not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old way ends in death; in the new way, the Holy Spirit gives life.*"¹⁹ It is the communication of a new covenant, centered on the person, work and teachings of Jesus that is the purpose of the New Testament. This purpose is not primarily historical, but redemptive in nature. For a writing to be included in the New Testament it must find its purpose in the message of the New Covenant. The apostle John attested to scriptures purpose in John 20:31 "*but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*"²⁰

Guideline number 5-Teaching Purpose

At the Last Supper Jesus told us to eat and drink in order to remember. Remembering is central to the New Testament writings. Although one may have heard the message before, to understand and apply it was also a purpose in New Testament writings. Clearly the purpose of teaching and applying the redemptive message was not just ethical in nature. The Church had to learn what a believer

¹⁶ 1 Thess 5:27 I command you in the name of the Lord to read this letter to all the brothers and sisters. NLT

¹⁷ 2 Peter 3:16

¹⁸ *The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament* page 1

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:6 NLT

²⁰ John 20:31 NLT

does after salvation. To inverse the order or importance of redemption and ethics is of no eternal value. The Christian philosophy had to be lived. In Matthew 25 Jesus speaks incredibly strong warnings to those whose faith is simply ideas. ²¹

Historicity

The process of New Testament canon is not simply a look at the Bible. It takes us through the leaders, heretics and issues of the early church. Much of the development of the canon and the church is interrelated. The physical history of the New Testament canon is early in date while broad in text and controversy. The textual-historical relationship is critical. Physical texts are important to adequately date the writings, and dating is crucial to prove apostolic authority.

There is much textual material to work with in comparison to other works of antiquity. Dr. Bruce Metzger of Princeton Theological Seminary puts the number of Greek New Testament manuscripts that predate the year 1000 at around 800²². “More than 40 Greek manuscripts date before the fourth century-several from the second century.”²³ By comparison, only seven copies of Plato’s manuscripts are in existence today with “a 1300 year gap separating the earliest copy from the original writings.”²⁴

To be fair, there is much we do not know about the early development of the New Testament canon. We must remember that although the church was not

21 . Matt 25:45-4645 And he will answer, 'I assure you, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.' 46 And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life."
NLT

22 *The Da Vinci Code Fact or Fiction*, page 44

23 Ibid page 75⁵

24 Ibid page 44

under a continual legal state of persecution before the reign of Emperor Decius²⁵, there was still intense though sporadic persecution. What texts were destroyed intentionally by Romans or simply rotted away in hiding places can never be known. What is clear is an ongoing and ever-increasingly methodical approach to collecting the letters of the church, amidst the persecutions.

Much of the credit for dating early texts must go to the heretics. Their attacks on points of scripture give us firm dates for many that otherwise would be hard to place chronologically. The clearest way to counter heretical claims about Christ and Christian theology would be to have apostolically authorized texts with which to refute false teaching.

Over the past two centuries much debate has taken place within the academic community concerning dates of manuscripts. David Fredrich Strauss, Rudolph Bultmann and others have hypothesized dates for the New Testament texts much later than possible if the texts were written by apostles. We must remember that both Testaments of the Bible were written by real people in real places. This organic process of authorship allows for substation by other people's lives, reigns and events that allow us a reasonably accurate sense of the dating of texts.

Early Church Fathers

According to Bruce Metzger, the oldest piece of New Testament parchment that we possess is a portion of the Gospel of John dated not later than 150 A.D. and possibly as early as the time of Trajan, which is 98-117. The oldest complete text of

²⁵ Decius was the Roman Emperor from (249-251). He was the first to initiate a nationwide and aggressive policy to force worship of the emperor.

the New Testament is the Codex Sinaiticus from the fourth century, well beyond the lifespan of the apostles. This dating is somewhat problematic to the establishment of a clearly apostolically written canon of scripture. Interestingly, some of the oldest references to scripture are found not in the actual texts themselves but in the writings of the early Church Fathers.

It is believed that the four Gospels and Paul's letters were available and circulating at the end of the first century. The primary tool for evaluating this claim is that the early church fathers allude to or directly cite most of the New Testament in their writings. Many of the writings of these early Church leaders predate our oldest textual evidence.

Clement of Rome, writing as early as 95 AD, exhorts readers to remember the words of Christ (the Gospels) and alludes to many other New Testament letters.²⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, and Irenaeus²⁷ collectively allude to or acknowledge quoting from: The four Gospels, Paul's letters, Hebrews, I Peter, I John, III John and Revelation.

Clement of Alexandria (150-211 A.D.) was the second known leader of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. In his works one finds citations of "all the books of the New Testament with the exception of: Philemon, James, II Peter, II John, and III John"²⁸ Clement's successor, Origen produced a list that was very similar.

A more formalized system

²⁶ Tektron webpage page 7 exhorts readers to "remember the words of the Lord Jesus" and contains quotations from Jesus which are found in our present texts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. ¹ Clement also contains allusions to Romans, Galatians, Philippians, and Ephesians, as well as possibly Hebrews, Acts, James, and 1 Peter.

²⁷ Ignatius of Antioch who was martyred around the year 110 A.D.; Justin Martyr's death is authenticated around the year 165 A.D., Polycarp, the disciple of John was martyred in 155 A.D., and Irenaeus died at the turn of the third century

²⁸ www.ntcanon.org

The Muratorian Canon, was named after L.A. Muratori (1672-1750), who discovered an eighth century copy of what is believed to be a canon produced in the Western church before 200 A.D. It lists the four gospels, Paul's letters, Jude, I and II John and Revelation.

Eusebius, who wrote in the early fourth century, gives us the most detailed early list of New Testament writings. "The 'Father of Church History' had at his disposal the library at Caesarea which Origen had built up after he had been forced to leave Alexandria"²⁹ Pamphilus who died in 310 in the persecution of Emperor Diocletian, added to this library Armed with such a library, Eusebius continued collecting Christian antiquities and began organizing the materials. Eusebius choose to communicate in his book, *Ecclesiastical History*, not only the texts that were currently in circulation, but also the opinions of the early church concerning them. Eusebius lists every book in the current New Testament canon in his list of books that he places in one of four categories of acceptance.

A. ***Recognized*** (those books universally accepted) includes: the gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles, I John, I Peter, Revelation

B. ***Disputed*** (familiar to the majority) Includes: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John

C. ***Spurious*** (rejected by some and accepted by others) include: Hebrews as well as the non-canonical books of the Didache, the Shepard of Hermes and some others.

D. ***Heretical*** (known but considered as heretical by most churchmen) include: The Gospels of Peter, Thomas and Matthias as well as the Acts of Andrew and John.

²⁹ www.NT Canon.org

Heretics and Purpose

Clearly from the early church fathers we see a developing sense of the canon. The question of why the Church would develop such a canon must take into consideration the providential will of God. With that factor always in mind, we must recognize that practical issues were at hand.

Perhaps no initiating factor has received more attention than the teachings of the heretics. As divergent theologies began to emerge from Christianity having to a rule of faith by which to measure truth became even more pressing. It is possible to overstate the role of the heretics in the canonical motivation of the early church, yet we also see in many of the writings of the early leaders that refuting heretics was important to the church. Clear apostolic authority was needed to refute the teachings of such heretics as Balsides, Velentinus, and Marcion.³⁰ These heretics either manipulated known scriptures or composed their own version of the events in the life of Christ. Most interesting is the work of Marcion, who used his own gutted versions of Luke and several of the Pauline Epistles to substantiate his ideas. What is obvious is that there was a collection of writings present for this wealthy ship owner to pick apart. A very different, but substantial, difficulty was the Montanists. Following the teaching of Montanus of Phrygia in the mid to late second century, this group focused on the validity of “ecstatic utterances.” This practice of somnambulistic rants produced, in the mind of the group’s leaders, further revelation from God. This theology clearly left the prophetic word of God

³⁰ The early second-century heretic Balsides proposed that Jesus and Simon of Cyrene switched places on the cross. Velentinus composed his own version gospel called The Gospel of Truth. For dating purposes, note that Marcion was excommunicated in Rome in 144 A.D.

completely open-ended without any reliable sense of measure or closure, thus the need for a canon.

The more formalized work

As we have seen in the words of the early church fathers and even in the teachings of the heretics, there were substantial lists of the New Testament books existed in both the Eastern and Western Churches by the end of the second century. What there was not were large scale conventions or synods to affirm a recognized set of accepted works. We must remember that this all took place under the ever-watchful and ever increasingly persecuting eye of the Roman Government. Most of the aforementioned church fathers were eventually martyred. It must also be noted that the churches tended to have a less than formal relationship with one another. By and large these were city churches, ruled by local bishops, elders and deacons.

The New Testament as we know it as a complete listing was communicated in the annual Easter Letter in the year 367 A.D. by Athanasius of Alexandria. Subsequent Councils at Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) gave a broader sense of acceptance. These councils were attended by the leading Bishops of the day. Generally the canon was an accepted conclusion in the church after this point in time, though there were issues and dissensions from time to time. In general the Eastern Church was less concrete on the idea of a canon than the Western Church. In terms of an official policy it was not until April 8 1546, that the Catholic Church voted on the issue of the canon.

The Protestant Church has drawn up several confessions of faith that identify the 27 books, including the French Confession of Faith (1559), the Belgic Confession (1561), and The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647). Interestingly large churches today continue to have major questions regarding the canon. “The Thirty-Nine Articles, issued by the Church of England in 1563, names the books of the Old Testament, but not the New Testament. None of the Confessional statements issued by any Lutheran church includes an explicit list of canonical books.”³¹ It is theologically problematic that such significant groups with-in the Church do not have a “rule or standard” to base belief.

Exclusions

Certain books that were in common use in the early church were excluded from the canon for the very reasons listed before, largely lack of apostolic authority. These books include *The Shepherd of Hermes* and *The Didache*. Other books lacked the clear gospel proclamation or were seen as written to support heresy. The Gospels of Thomas and the Gospel according to the Egyptians are examples so such works. It must be noted that as Eusubeus states, not all of these are heretical. A reading of these texts gives evidence to the fact that many of them, while having historical and in some cases ethical and faith benefit, are not on par with the accepted books. Failing the test of apostolic authority is only the first disqualifier.

Twenty of the New Testament books were quickly and universally accepted by the early church and have strong evidence of apostolic authority. The

³¹ <http://www.ntcanon.org/closing-west.shtml>

remaining seven have received the most criticism and have been the “lighting rods” for biblical criticism. Some have been questioned because of questions of apostolic authority (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Hebrews) content (Jude, Revelation) and, in the case of James, theological difficulties. What is clearly seen in each of these books however, is the value they bring to the New Testament. In Revelation and Jude we find encouragement in rough times. The admonitions to love others in 2 and 3 John are some of the most oft quoted verses in Christendom. The stern warnings that faith must show itself in life are some of the greatest points made in James. Clearly each book brings a breadth to the canon that has enriched the Christian faith. These books also are consistent with the teachings of the Gospels and the early accepted Pauline letters.

Conclusion

Facts are important, but belief, while involving facts, also involves something more. The Bible in both New and Old Testament has been a source of hope for people through the ages. An understanding of the process of how we gained this sacred book is certainly beneficial. I am left however with an unshakable truth; the witness of the Spirit in the life of the receiver of scripture does make it come alive. I am not sure if my wife understands any of the issues I have written about in this paper. I doubt that she knows who Ignatius or Eusebius were, at least not until she reads this. What my life has is a love for God’s Word that is sweet to a point of envy for me. For nearly 25 years she has had the same Bible, filled with underlines passages and tattered sermon notes. The simple acts of reading and studying scripture have shaped and sustained her life. The self-revelation of God’s Word has power in her life that I

have always respected and learned from. I am thankful for the canon, for what I understand about it and what is clearly divine.

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