

Apologetics - Lesson 3

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Begin Canon Study

The NT Canon

- Attributes of Canon

Goals

1. To provide the definition of Canon
2. To provide some facts we should know of canon
3. To provide the history of canon
4. To provide the attributes of canon
5. To provide some answers to arguments in relation to issue of canon.

WHAT YOU MIGHT HEAR

Early Christianity was a total mess as there was mass disagreement over theology.

So there was no “Christianity.” There were different Christianities fighting for supremacy.

And each Christianity had it’s own books

Therefore the 27 books we have should not be considered special or privileged. They simply represent the books belonging to the Christian sect that won and became dominant.

Well Rounded Definition of Canon

Community (reception)

Exclusive Definition - Canon is when there is a closed, final, fixed list of books recognized by the church

With this definition, you cannot have a canon until the 4th or 5th Century at the earliest.

Community (function)

Functional Definition - we have canon when there is a collection of books functioning as authoritative and religious norm, regardless if the list is open or closed.

With this definition, it would put the date of canon into the 2nd century.

Divinely Given

Ontological Definition- Canon is defined as those given by God as a redemptive - historical deposit.

With this definition there would be a canon in the first century.

As soon as Paul finished a letter, it would be considered canon.

These 3 definitions combined, instead of just one, provide us with a clearer understanding on how to define the canon. The books were written with divine authority from God > the books are recognized and used as Scripture by the early christians > the corporate church receives a consensus around these books

Insisting that only a single definition rightly captures the depth and breadth of canon may end up bringing more distortion than clarification. While the exclusive definition correctly reminds us that a general consensus on the boundaries of the canon was not achieved until the fourth century, it can give the misleading impression that there was little agreement over the core books prior to this time period. While the functional definition correctly reminds us that the NT books served as an authoritative norm at quite an early time, it still does not address what these books are in and of themselves. While the ontological definition brings the necessary balance to both of these approaches - offering a reminder that these books do not become canonical simply by the actions of the church - it too cannot stand alone. To have only the ontological definition would lead us to wrongly conclude that these books were basically lowered from heaven as a completed canon with no development or history in the real world. Ironically, then, perhaps the debate over canon is best addressed not by choosing one definition, but by allowing for the legitimacy of multiple definitions that interface with one another. If canon is a multidimensional phenomenon, then perhaps it is best defined in a multidimensional fashion.

- Dr. Michael Kruger

NT Canon - Facts We Should Know

1. **The NT books are the earliest Christian writings we have.**

- a. bring us closest to the historical Jesus and the earliest church
- b. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the only gospels from 1st Century
- c. There is debate about some other “maybe” first century Christian writings but focus is on that all the 27 books are from the 1st Century, not that there are no other early writings
- d. This would be a good refocusing point to any argument concerning the canon

2. **The NT books are unique because they are Apostolic books**

- a. The Lord himself commissioned the Apostles and their authority (Mark 3:14-15, Matthew 10:20, Matthew 10:14, Ephesians 2:20)
- b. The Canon is a by product of the ministry of the apostles or companions of the apostles when they were alive. The canon is a by product of the apostles and were written during the apostolic age.

NT Canon - Facts We Should Know

3. **Some NT writers quote others NT writers as scripture**

- a. Shows that an understanding of new scriptures were an early rather than late development
- b. 2 Peter 3:15-16, 2 Peter 3:2, 1 Tim 5:18, Luke 10:7
- c. Beyond the more in depth disputes of some of these books and passages, this is an example to show, again, that the NT writers understood aspects of canon in the early stages

4. **Apocryphal NT Writings are all written in the 2nd Century or later**

- a. Apocryphal books were written books not accepted into the canon as protestants know it today
- b. Although there is debate as to the date of NT scripture, almost all scholars agree that ALL apocryphal writings are 2nd century or later
- c. Although some of these writings possibly contain reliable Jesus tradition, the evidence is not strong enough at all to elevate it into the NT canon. (we will discuss in a later lesson some examples)

NT Canon - Facts We Should Know

5. **The NT Canon was not decided at Nicea in 325 A.D. or any other council.**
 - a. Nicea had nothing to do with Canon, but rather the divinity of Jesus and how to articulate it
 - b. Church councils such as Laodicea, Hippo, and Carthage were only declaring the books they believed that had been functioning rather than what books they wanted in or out.
 - c. The NT was not decided by a vote or council but rather an ancient widespread consensus

6. **The 4 Gospels are well established by the end of the 2nd Century**
 - a. Church Patristic writings give us ample reasons (Justin Martyr, Tatian, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and many more)
 - b. Culminating with Irenaeus famous quote (quote on next slide), we can see how the handing down of these 4 Gospels led to a proclamation of them being well established and received.

Irenaeus - Bishop of Lyons, A.D. 180

“**The Gospels could not possibly be either more or less in number than they are.** Since there are **four zones of the world** in which we live, and **four principal winds**, while the Church is spread over all the earth, and the pillar and foundation of the Church is the gospel, and the Spirit of life, it fittingly has **four pillars**, everywhere breathing out incorruption and revivifying men. From this it is clear that the Word, the artificer of all things, being manifested to men gave us the gospel, fourfold in form but held together by one Spirit. As David said, when asking for his coming, 'O sinner upon the cherubim, show yourself'. For the **cherubim have four faces**, and their faces are images of the activity of the Son of God. For the first living creature, it says, was like a lion, signifying his active and princely and royal character; the second was like an ox, showing his sacrificial and priestly order; the third had the face of a man, indicating very clearly his coming in human guise; and the fourth was like a flying eagle, making plain the giving of the Spirit who broods over the Church. Now the Gospels, in which Christ is enthroned, are like these.”

NT Canon - Facts We Should Know

7. Early Christians often used Non Canonical Writings

- a. We must recognize that Christians used other books besides the NT writings but we must not make the mistake to correlate that with they thought they were scripture.
- b. Manner of citation
 - i. We must see it in the sense that we also use other books from other writers such as Watchmen Nee, Lance Lambert, Dana Congdon, John Piper, etc, but although we use them, we don't regard them as having the same weight as scripture.
- c. Frequency of citation
 - i. The frequency of citation of non canonical writings vs canonical writings from patristic fathers is far in favor of the NT writings.
 - ii. relevant example : Clement of Alexandria used both canonical and non canonical writings.
of references to apocryphal gospels - 16, # of references to gospel of Matthew - 757

NT Canon - Facts We Should Know

8. **Christians did disagree about the Canonicity of some of the NT books**

- a. It is important that we understand the reality of actual disputes among some early Christians lest we think it is like a dispute free fantasy world of the development of canon. It was not delivered on golden tablets from an angel as Mormons believe. God reasoned that it would be delivered in normal historical circumstances, which are not always smooth.
 - i. Church Father Origen talks about disputes between 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and James
 - ii. Dionysius of Alexandria tells us that some thought Revelation wasn't written by John and thus should be rejected.
- b. What we should know is that the disputes are mostly on only a handful of books, not every book
- c. Even though there were disputes, the church did eventually end up on a long lasting consensus
- d. Attackers often have the underlying issue on how God's method in giving us the canon. What would people expect it to look like?