

TWELVE POINTS OF LIGHT

POINT TWO - ATHANASIUS: CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

INTRODUCTION

- A. Definition of canon
 - 1. Literal: a reed or straight rod used for measuring in architecture
 - 2. Metaphorical: a "standard" by which something is measured
 - 3. Theological: inspired writings which serve as the standard, the authority, the rule of faith for the Church
- B. Basic issues concerning the Canon
 - 1. Development - how was inspiration recognized?
 - 2. Close - has inspiration ceased?
 - 3. Extent - what is recognized as inspired?
- C. Terms in bibliology
 - 1. Revelation - the communication of truth that cannot be otherwise discovered
 - 2. Authority - revelation of God is binding upon mankind
 - 3. Inerrancy - without error in the original manuscripts
 - 4. Illumination - the One who inspired men in the writing of Scripture, illumines the minds of those who read it, Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:18; 1 Cor. 2:6-16; 1 John 2:20, 27
 - 5. Inspiration - The Holy Spirit so guided and superintended the writers of the Bible, making use of their own unique personalities, that they wrote all that He wanted them to write, without excess or error.
 - a. Limited to the writers of Scripture
 - b. Holy Spirit preserved the writers from all errors and from all omissions
 - c. Confirmed only of the autographs
- D. Contemporary Topics
 - 1. The New Testament is a complete entity shaped by God, but is continually supplemented by additional living prophetic voices in the church.
 - 2. In 1945, a collection of Coptic documents was found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Shouldn't we at least consider the possibility of expanding the New Testament based on the discovery of new manuscripts?
 - 3. Circulation of more "Gospels" which give greater insight into the life of Christ, as the Gospel of Thomas, 4.1-2, "After this again he went through the village, and a lad ran and knocked against his shoulder. Jesus was exasperated and said to him: "You shall not go further on your way," and the child immediately fell down and died. But some, who saw what took place, said: "From where does this child spring, since his every word is an accomplished deed?" And the parents of the dead child came to Joseph and blamed him and said: "Since you have such a child, you cannot dwell with us in the village; or else teach him to bless and not to curse. For he is slaying our children."
 - 4. Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, where Seventh Day Adventists were recruited for membership by being warned that one cannot interpret the Bible without a prophet, David Koresh.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

- A. Keys to determining canonicity
 - 1. Apostolicity
 - a. An apostle or close relation to one, John 15:27, "and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning."
 - 1) Mark, a co-laborer of Peter
 - 2) Luke, a co-laborer of Paul
 - 3) James and Jude, half-brothers of Jesus Christ
 - b. Antiquity - close to the NT era

2. Content

c. Evidence of divine inspiration, 2 Tim. 3:16.

- 1) It is God-breathed
 - a) Evidence of high moral and spiritual values - Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha were rejected as result of this test
 - b) Doctrinal consistency - Gospel of Peter was rejected for this
 - 2) Jesus affirmed the inspiration of the New Testament.
 - a) Apostles would be safeguarded from error in their writing, John 14:26; 16:14.
 - b) The Holy Spirit would enable them to understand, John 16:12-15.
 - 3) The Holy Spirit guided the NT writers.
 - a) He helped them remember the facts of Christ's teaching.
 - b) He enabled them to understand theologically what they were writing.
 - c) He guaranteed the completion of the entire NT, John 14:26.
 - 4) NT writers recognized they were writing Scripture.
 - a) Direct revelation, Gal. 1:12
 - b) Instructed by Holy Spirit, 1 Cor. 2:13
 - c) God's commands - free from error, 1 Cor:14:37; 1 Thes. 4:2, 15
 - d) Recognized as God's Word by early church, 1 Thes. 2:13
 - 5) NT writers recognized that each other's writings as inspired
 - a) In 1 Tim. 5:18, Paul quoted Deut. 25:4 and Luke 10:7, "the Scripture says."
 - b) In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter equated Paul's writings with "the rest of Scripture."
 - c) Also, note 2 Peter 3:2.
- d. Christocentric - Jesus Christ is theological foundation for the NT canon
- e. Doctrinal consistency

2. Universality

- a. Received throughout the Christian community, "The canon was created in principle by divine inspiration. The Church's part was to discern the canon which God had created, not to devise one of its own." International Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, Chicago, 1978.
- b. Verified apostolic books were read publicly in the churches putting them on par with the Old Testament, Col. 4:16; 1 Thes. 5:27; Rev. 1:3, 11.
- c. Confined to accepted apostolic writings attested by apostolic signature or envoy, Luke 1:1-4; 2 Thes. 2:2; 3:17, salutation of Paul, "with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write."

B. Defining the canon

1. Efforts to form a New Testament canon came from heretical movements that threatened Christian orthodoxy in the 2nd Century.
2. Marcion of Sinope (140 A.D.)
 - a. First to provide a canon
 - b. Attempted to sever all Jewish ties to Christianity
 - 1) Abandoned the Old Testament because the OT God is inferior to the God of the New Testament
 - 2) Claimed his theological position was based on Pauline theology
3. Montanus (150 A.D.)
 - a. A converted pagan priest who claimed to have new divine revelation
 - b. This early "charismatic" movement fueled initial efforts to confirm the canon
4. The term "New Testament" was coined by Tertullian (200 A.D.), acknowledging the same quality of inspiration in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures
5. Definitions of the New Testament (see chart 1, *Four Definition of the New Testament*).

CLOSE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

A. Historical Reason

1. End of the line of apostles
 - a. Apostolic office ended with the death of the last apostle
 - b. An apostle was directly commissioned by Jesus Christ, Acts 1:21-22, "Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection."
2. NT authorship disappears with apostles since they would not be there to write or sanction writings

B. Scriptural implication

1. Warning against false teachers with reference to completeness of canon
2. Jude 3, "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort [you] that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."

C. Theological reason

1. God's revelation of Himself is complete
2. Doctrinal integrity and consistency are maintained, Hebrews 1:1-2, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by [his] Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds."

EXTENT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

A. 2nd Century A.D.

1. All but 7 books were recognized as canon
2. Antilegomena: books canonized but debated as to authenticity:
 - a. Hebrews
 - 1) Not signed and author was not known
 - 2) Impressive doctrinal and spiritual content
 - b. James
 - 1) Not among the apostles
 - 2) General nature of book
 - c. 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude
 - 1) Brief
 - 2) Written late
 - 3) General nature of the books
 - 4) Jude not among the apostles
 - d. Revelation
 - 1) Most often and most vigorously defended in the early Church
 - 2) Not disputed until 4th Century during controversy concerning the millennium

B. 4th Century A.D.

1. Athanasius (ca. 296 - 373)
 - a. Defended orthodoxy from Arianism
 - b. Elected Bishop of Alexandria in 328, in his early 20s
 - c. Exiled to Germany in 335 by Constantine for excluding from church membership anyone who did not subscribe to the Creed of Nicea
 - d. Exiled on 4 different occasions between 339 and 366

- e. 39th Festal Letter of 367
 - 1) An annual letter to the church
 - 2) It included a list of Christian books he said were inspired by God, “In these alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed. No one may add to them, and nothing may be taken away from them.”
 - 3) It was the first time a church leader identified the books that compose the New Testament.
 - 4) His list was intended to end disputes concerning “The Shepherd of Hermas” and “The Epistle of Barnabas.”
Also, it silenced those who questioned the authenticity of Peter’s letters and the Book of Revelation.
- 2. All 27 books in our present canon were recognized by church councils by the end of the 4th century.
 - a. Damatine Council of Rome (382)
 - b. 3rd Council of Carthage (397)
- 3. By 500, all Greek-speaking churches and those in the East accepted present NT canon.

C. References concerning the extent of the New Testament Canon (see chart 2).

CONCLUSION

- A. The canon was not established by authoritative measure but acknowledged that which is inspired.
- B. The foundational basis for the New Testament Canon is the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- C. Churches were providentially kept from accepting illegitimate books which contained doctrinal deviations.

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Chart 1: Four Definitions of the New Testament

Book	Marcion (ca. 140)	Muratorian (ca. 170)	Eusebius (ca. 325)	Athanasius (367)		
Matthew	No					
Mark						
Luke	Yes					
John	No					
Acts						
Romans	Yes				Yes	Yes
1 Corinthians						
2 Corinthians						
Galatians						
Ephesians						
Philippians						
Colossians						
1 Thessalonians						
2 Thessalonians						
1 Timothy						
2 Timothy						
Titus						
Philemon						
Hebrews	No				No	
James						
1 Peter		Yes				
2 Peter	No					
1 John	Yes	Yes				
2 John						
3 John	No	No				
Jude	Yes	Yes				
Revelation of John						
Wisdom of Solomon	Yes	No				
Revelation of Peter						

Chart 2: References Concerning the Extent of the New Testament Canon

Date	Source	Comments
50-90 A.D.	New Testament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Timothy 5:18, introduced a quotation from Deut. 25:4 and another from Luke 10:7 • 2 Peter 3:15-16 where Paul's writings are equated with other Scripture
95	Clement of Rome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quoted Jesus' words in parallel to OT (equal authority) • Quoted Paul's letters of 1 Corinthians
110	Ignatius of Antioch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciple of the Apostle John • Quoted Matthew and Mark, To the Romans, IV
115	Polycarp	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Called the apostolic writings "Scripture" and cited Ephesians 4:26
125	Basilides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Called the New Testament "Scripture"
140	Papias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciple of the Apostle John • Told how the word of the ancient fathers had been replaced by the authority of the written Word
148	Justin Martyr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In regard to meetings of Christians, "They would read either the Memoirs of the apostles or the Gospels...along with the books of the prophets; and in each assembly, after the reading, the president would give an exhortation based on the reading." <u>Apology I, 6)</u>
110-180	Tatian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compiled the <u>Diatessaron</u> (by means of four) earliest harmony of the four Gospels (160 A.D.) • It assumes the existence of only four authoritative Gospels, "Just as there are four points of the compass and four principal winds, so also the worldwide church appropriately rests on four pillars (the Gospels)"
130-202	Irenaeus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciple of Polycarp in Rome • In <u>Against Heresies</u>, he cites 21 writings as canonical: Gospels, Pauline Epistles (except Philemon), 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation
170-180	Muratorian Fragment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First canon listing within non-heretical church • All listed except 1 and 2 Peter, Hebrews, James
160-220	Tertullian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held that a writing must be by an apostle or composed under apostolic authority • Excluded Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John
367	Athanasius of Alexandria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First to use the word canon in reference to NT • First complete listing of 27 NT books, <u>Letters</u>.