

Historical Theology:

The Canon of New Testament Scripture

By Don White
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“The term **canon** originally referred to a stick by which a measurement was made. By extension it came to mean a rule or standard, and finally it was applied to an authoritative list of something, such as all the books written by a certain author or in this case, the books of Scripture.” (White, p. 100)

“The biblical canon is the collection of scriptural books that God has given His corporate people, which are distinguished by their divine qualities, reception by the collective body, and their apostolic connection, either by authorship or association.” (Kruger, *The Biblical Canon*)

The Bible is, for Christians, our only rule or standard for faith and practice.

Jude 1:3

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all time handed down to the saints.

For the purposes of our study we will focus primarily on the canon of New Testament Scripture since the Old Testament canon had been widely recognized, for the most part, by the time of the birth of Christ.

The New Testament writers frequently quoted from the Old Testament without an argument about whether it was included as belonging to the canon of Scripture. Kruger notes that “there is no not a single instance anywhere of a NT author citing a book as

Scripture that it is not in our current thirty-nine book canon. And while Jesus himself had many disagreements with the Jewish leadership of his day, there appears to be no indication that there was any disagreement over which books were Scripture—a reality which is hard to explain if the OT canon was still in flux.” (*The Biblical Canon*)

Examples:

Matthew 22:23-33 (esp. vv. 29-32)

Romans 4:23-24; 15:4

1 Corinthians 10:4-11

In this presentation, I relied on the resources of Michael J. Kruger listed below.

Michael J. Kruger, author of *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Crossway 2012), wrote a helpful series on the New Testament canon, *Ten Basic Facts about the New Testament Canon that Every Christian Should Memorize* which is designed to help Christian lay people, as well as others, understand ten basic facts about its origin.

<https://www.monergism.com/10-basic-facts-about-nt-canon-every-christian-should-memorize>

The ten basic facts are:

#1. The New Testament books are the earliest Christian writings we possess.

“One of the most formidable challenges in any discussion about the New Testament canon is explaining what makes these 27 books unique. Why these and not

others? There are many answers to that question, but in this blog post we are focusing on just one: the *date* of these books. These books stand out as distinctive because they are [the] earliest Christian writings we possess and thus bring us the closest to the historical Jesus and to the earliest church. If we want to find out what authentic Christianity was really like, then we should rely on the writings that are the nearest to that time period.” (Kruger 1/21/2013)

“This is particularly evident when it comes to the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are the only gospel accounts that derive from the first century. Sure, there are a few scholars have attempted to put the *Gospel of Thomas* in the first century, but this has not met with much success. After all the scholarly dust has settled, even critics agree that these four are the earliest accounts of Jesus that we possess.” (Ibid.)

“Just to be clear, we are not arguing here that books are canonical simply because they have a first century date. Other Christian writings existed in the first century that were not canonical.... **Our point is not that all first century books are canonical, but that all our canonical books are first century.** (Emphasis mine). And that is a point worth making.” (Ibid.)

“In the end, every Christian should remember one basic fact, namely that the New Testament books are distinctive because, generally speaking, they are the earliest Christian writings we possess. None are earlier. If so, then it seems that the books included in the New Testament are not as arbitrary as some would have us believe. On the contrary, it seems that these are precisely the books we would include if we wanted to have access to authentic Christianity.” (Ibid.)

#2. Apocryphal writings are all written in the second century or later.

“The word *apocrypha* literally means “hidden away.” In an esteemed sense, these writings were “‘hidden’ or withdrawn from common use because they were regarded as containing mysterious or esoteric lore, too profound to be communicated to any except the initiated (Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 5.) But in a pejorative sense, these writings are hidden for good reason. They are deemed theologically suspicious and even heretical by many. Jewish and Protestant circles flat out reject these writings as authoritative for the faith and practice of the church. But Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians accept most of these texts as canonical.” (www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-the-apocrypha)

“While we cannot go into extensive detail about these various apocryphal writings, we can at least note one basic fact that is often overlooked: *all of these apocryphal writings are dated to the second century or later.* Thus, this post is the corollary of the prior one. Not only are all New Testament writings from the first century, but all apocryphal writings (at least the ones that are extant) are from the second century or later. And many are from the third or fourth century.” (Kruger, 2/5/2013)

“What is particularly noteworthy about this fact is that even critical scholars agree. While there is dispute over the dating of some New Testament books (e.g., 2 Peter, the Pastoral Epistles), there is virtual unanimity over the late date of apocryphal books. There are, of course, fringe attempts to place some apocryphal writings into the first century...but these suggestions have not been widely received.” (Ibid.)

“The observation of this simple fact quickly calls into question sensationalistic claims about how these “lost” books contain the “real” version of Christianity.” *Ibid.*)

“To be clear, this does not suggest that it is impossible, in principle, for an apocryphal writing to be first century (it’s just that we have not found one yet). Nor does this suggest that apocryphal writings could not (or did not) ever contain reliable Jesus tradition. We know that early Christians sometimes appealed to apocryphal gospels as containing some true material (more on this in a later post). But, and this is the key point, *the scraps of apocryphal literature that may be reliable do not present a version of Christianity that is out of sync with what we find in the New Testament books, and are certainly not in a position to supersede what we find in the New Testament books.*” (*Ibid.*)

#3. The New Testament books are unique because they are apostolic books.

“Jesus had commissioned his apostles “so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority” (Mark 3:14–15). When Jesus sent out the twelve, he reminds them that “For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt 10:20). Thus, he is able to give a warning to those who reject the apostles’ authority: “If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words...it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town” (Matt 10:14).” (Kruiger, 2/19/2013)

“In sum, the apostles had the very authority of Christ himself. They were his mouthpiece. As such, their teachings, along with the prophets, were the very foundation of the church. Paul describes the church as “built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets” (Eph 2:20). If the church

wanted to know the true Christian message, they would always need to look back to the teaching of the apostles.” (*Ibid.*)

“But, the apostles didn’t just teach about Jesus orally. At some point—a very early point—the apostolic message was written down. Often it was written down by the apostles themselves. At other points it was written down by companions of apostles who were recording their message. Either way, the authoritative apostolic message found its way into books.” (*Ibid.*)

“For obvious reasons, the church would value apostolic books over and above other type of books. And this is exactly what happened. The books that the church regarded as apostolic were the books that were read, copied, and used most often in early Christian worship. These are the books that eventually became the New Testament canon. The canon is the byproduct of the ministry of the apostles.” (*Ibid.*)

In fact, the church’s overt dependence on apostolic writings is precisely why we see a proliferation of “apocryphal” books in the second century (and later) that were named after apostles. We have the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Acts of John*, and even the *Gospel of the Twelve*! Rather than raising doubts about the apostolic nature of the New Testament, these apocryphal writings actually serve to confirm it. They show that the early church valued apostolic books so much that forgers had to try and mimic the genuine ones in order to get a hearing.” (*Ibid.*)

“In the end, the New Testament canon exists because of an early Christian belief that the apostles spoke for Christ. That belief led Christians to value apostolic books. And those apostolic books eventually formed the New Testament that we know today.” (*Ibid.*)

#4. Some New Testament writers quote other New Testament writers as Scripture.

“One of the most controversial issues in the study of the New Testament canon is the date when these books were regarded as Scripture. When were these books first used as an authoritative guide for the church? Critical scholars will argue that these books were not written to be Scripture and were not even used as Scripture until the end of the second century.” (Kruger, 3/4/2013)

“But one of the most basic facts that Christians should know is that some New Testament writers actually quote other New Testament writers as Scripture. This demonstrates that the concept of a new corpus of biblical books was not a late development, but one that seems to be present in the earliest stages of Christianity.

Examples:

2 Peter 3:1-2,14-16

1 Timothy 5:18 (Luke 10:7)

If the NT writers were citing other NT writers as Scripture, then that suggests the canon was not a later ecclesiastical development, but something early and innate to the early Christian faith. And that is a basic fact that all Christians should know. (Ibid.)

#5. The four Gospels are well established by the end of the second century.

When it comes to basic facts about the NT canon that Christians should memorize, one of the most critical is the statement by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, around A.D. 180: “It is not possible that the gospels can be either more or fewer than the number they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live and four principle winds... [and] the cherubim, too, were four-faced.” (Kruger, 4/4/2013)

Here Irenaeus not only affirms the canonicity the four gospels, but is keen to point out that *only* these four gospels are recognized by the church. Indeed, Irenaeus is so certain that the canon of the gospels is closed that he can argue that it is entrenched in the very structure of creation—four zones of the world, four principle winds, etc. (Ibid.)

“In the end, there are ample reasons to reject the idea that Irenaeus was the inventor of the fourfold gospel canon. Not only did his contemporaries have this same view, but this view was even shared by those before him. Thus, we must consider the possibility that Irenaeus was actually telling the truth when he says that the fourfold gospel was something that was “handed down to him.” (Ibid.)

#6. At the end of the second century, the Muratorian Fragment lists 22 of our 27 New Testament books.

“One of the key data points in any discussion of canon is something called the Muratorian fragment (also known as the Muratorian canon). This fragment, named after its discoverer Ludovico Antonio Muratori, contains our earliest list of the books in the New Testament. While the fragment itself dates from the 7th or 8th century, the list it contains was originally written in Greek and dates back to the end of the second century (c.180).” (Kruger, 5/6/2013)

“What is noteworthy for our purposes here is that the Muratorian fragment affirms 22 of the 27 books of the New Testament. These include the four Gospels, Acts, all 13 epistles of Paul, Jude, 1 John, 2 John (and possibly 3rd John), and Revelation. This means that at a remarkably early point (end of the second century), the central core of the New Testament canon was already established and in place.” (Ibid.)

“Thus, the Muratorian fragment stands as a reminder of two important facts. First, Christians did disagree over books from time to time. That was an inevitability, particularly in the early stages. But this list also reminds us of a second (and more fundamental) fact, namely that there was widespread agreement over the core from a very early time.” (Ibid.)

#7. Early Christians often used non-canonical writings.

“For Christians struggling to understand the development of the New Testament canon, one of the most confusing (and perhaps concerning) facts is that early Christian writers often cited from and used non-canonical writings. In other words, early Christians did not just use books from our current New Testament, but also read books like the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, and the *Epistle of Barnabas*.” (Kruger, 5/20/2013)

“Usually Christians discover this fact as they read a book or article that is highly critical of the New Testament canon, and this fact is used as a reason to think that our New Testament writings are nothing special. The literary preferences of the earliest Christians were wide open, we are told. Or, as one critic put it, early Christians read a “boundless, living mass of heterogenous” texts.[1]” (Ibid.)

“Because this fact is used to criticize the integrity of the New Testament canon, then all Christians should be keen to learn it. While the fact itself is true—early Christians did read and use many writings not in the canon—the conclusions often drawn from this fact are often not.” (Ibid.)

“When scholars mention the Christian use of non-canonical writings, two facts are often left out:

1. *The manner of citation.* It is important to note that while Christians often cited and used non-canonical literature, they

only rarely cited them as Scripture. For the most part, Christians were simply using these books as helpful, illuminating, or edifying writings. This is not all that different than practices in our modern day. A preacher may quote from CS Lewis in a sermon, but that does not mean he puts Lewis’s authority on par with Scripture itself.

“When we ask the question about which books early Christians cited most often as *Scripture*, then the answer is overwhelmingly in favor of the books that eventually made it into the New Testament canon.

2. *Frequency of citation.* Another often overlooked factor is the relative degree of frequency between citations of New Testament books and citations of non-canonical books. For example, scholars often appeal to Clement of Alexandria as the standard example of an early Christian that used non-canonical literature equally with canonical literature. But, when it comes to frequency of citation, this is far from true.

“J.A. Brooks, for instance, has observed that Clement cites the canonical books “about sixteen times more often than apocryphal and patristic writings.”[2] When it comes to gospels, the evidence is even better. Clement cites apocryphal gospels only 16 times, whereas, he cites just the gospel of Matthew 757 times.[3]

“In sum, Christians need to memorize this simple fact about the New Testament canon: early Christians used many other books besides those that made it into our Bibles. But, this should not surprise us. For, indeed, we still do the very same thing today even though we have a New Testament that has been settled for over 1600 years.” (Ibid.)

#8. The New Testament canon was not decided at Nicea—nor any other church council.

“For whatever set of reasons, there is a widespread belief out there (internet, popular books) that the New Testament canon was decided at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD—under the conspiratorial influence of Constantine. The fact that this claim was made in Dan Brown’s best-seller *The Da Vinci Code* shows how widespread it really is. Brown did not make up this belief; he simply used it in his book.” (Kruger, 6/4/2013)

“The problem with this belief, however, is that it is patently false. The Council of Nicea had nothing to do with the formation of the New Testament canon (nor did Constantine). Nicea was concerned with how Christians should articulate their beliefs about the divinity of Jesus. Thus it was the birthplace of the Nicene creed.

“When people discover that Nicea did not decide the canon, the follow up question is usually, “Which council did decide the canon?” Surely we could not have a canon without some sort of authoritative, official act of the church by which it was decided. Surely we have a canon because some group of men somewhere voted on it. Right?” (Ibid.)

“This whole line of reasoning reveals a fundamental assumption about the New Testament canon that needs to be corrected, namely that it was (or had to be) decided by a church council. The fact of the matter is that when we look into early church history there is no such council. Sure, there are regional church councils that made declarations about the canon (Laodicea, Hippo, Carthage). But these regional councils did not just “pick” books they happened to like, but affirmed the books they believed *had functioned as foundational documents for the Christian faith*. In other words, these councils were

declaring the way things had been, not the way they wanted them to be.” (Ibid.)

“Thus, these councils did not create, authorize, or determine the canon. They simply were part of the process of *recognizing* a canon that was already there.” (Ibid.)

“This raises an important fact about the New Testament canon that every Christian should know. The shape of our New Testament canon was not determined by a vote or by a council, but by a broad and ancient consensus.... This historical reality is a good reminder that the canon is not just a man-made construct. It was not the result of a power play brokered by rich cultural elites in some smoke filled room. It was the result of many years of God’s people reading, using, and responding to these books.” (Ibid.)

“The same was true for the Old Testament canon. Jesus himself used and cited the Old Testament writings with no indication anywhere that there was uncertainty about which books belonged. Indeed, he held his audience accountable for knowing these books. But, in all of this, there was no Old Testament church council that officially picked them (not even Jamnia). They too were the result of ancient and widespread consensus.” (Ibid.)

“In the end, we can certainly acknowledge that humans played a role in the canonical process. But, not the role that is so commonly attributed to them. Humans did not determine the canon, they *responded* to it. In this sense, we can say that the canon really chose itself.” (Ibid.)

#9. Christians did disagree about the canonicity of some New Testament books.

“When it comes to basic facts that all Christians should know about the canon, it is important that we recognize that the

development of the canon was not always neat and tidy. It was not a pristine, problem-free process where everyone agreed on everything right from the outset.” (Kruger, 6/26/2013)

“On the contrary, the history of the canon is, at points, quite tumultuous. Some Christians received books that were later rejected and regarded as apocryphal. More than this, there was disagreement at times even over some canonical books.” (Ibid.)

“For instance, Origen mentions that books like 2 Peter, 2-3 John, and James were doubted and disputed by some in his own day. Also, Dionysius of Alexandria tells us that some thought that Revelation was not written by the apostle John and should therefore be rejected.” (Ibid.)

“It is important that we be reminded of such disputes and debates lest we conceive of the history of the canon in an overly-sanitized fashion. The canon was not given to us on golden tablets by an angel from heaven (as claimed for the *Book of Mormon*). God, for his own providential reasons, chose to deliver the canon through normal historical circumstances. And historical circumstances are not always smooth.” (Ibid.)

“What is unfortunate, however, is that these disagreements amongst Christians are sometimes used as an argument against the validity of the 27-book canon we know today. Critics claim that such disagreements call into question the entire canonical enterprise. Why should we trust the outcome, it is argued, if some Christians disagreed?” (Ibid.)

“Several factors should be considered in response. First, we shouldn’t overlook the fact that these disputes only affected a handful of books. Critics often present the history of the canon as if every book were equally in dispute. That is simply not the case. As we saw in a prior post, the vast

majority of these books were in place by the end of the second century.” (Ibid.)

“Second, we should not overestimate the extent of these disputes. Origen, for example, simply tells us that these books were disputed *by some*. But, in the case of 2 Peter, Origen is quite clear that he himself accepts it. Thus, there are no reasons to think that most Christians during this time period rejected these books. On the contrary, it seems that church fathers like Origen were simply acknowledging the minority report.” (Ibid.)

“Third, we should also remember that the church eventually reached a broad, deep, and long-lasting consensus over these books that some disputed. After the dust had settled on all these canonical discussions, the church was quite unified regarding these writings.” (Ibid.)

“Whenever someone shows angst over these early canonical disagreements, I often ask a simple question: “What did you expect the process would be like?” It is at this point, that people often realize they have an overly-pristine expectation about how God would deliver his books—an expectation that is entirely their own and not derived from Scripture or from history.” (Ibid.)

“All of this reminds us that God sometimes uses normal historical processes to accomplish his ends. And those historical processes are not always neat and tidy. But, this should not detract from the reality that the ends are still God’s.” (Ibid.)

#10. Early Christians believed that canonical books were self-authenticating.

“How do we know which books are from God, and which are not? There are many answers to that question, some of which we have covered in prior posts. Certainly the apostolic origins of a book can help identify it as being from God. And, the church’s

overall consensus on a book can be part of how we identify it as being from God.” (Kruger, 7/22/2013)

“But, it is interesting to note that the early church fathers, while agreeing that apostolicity and church-reception are fundamentally important, also appealed to another factor that is often overlooked in modern studies. They appealed to the *internal qualities* of these books.” (Ibid.)

“In other words, they argued that these books bore certain attributes that distinguished them as being from God. They argued that they could hear the voice of their Lord in these particular books. In modern theological language, they believed that canonical books are *self-authenticating*. As Jesus said in John 10:27: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”” (Ibid.)

“Of course, at this point one might object: “If the internal qualities of these books really exist, then how do we explain why they are rejected by so many? Why don’t more people see these qualities?”

“The answer lies in the role of the Holy Spirit in helping people see what is objectively there. Due to the noetic effects of sin (Rom 3:10-18), one cannot recognize these qualities without the *testimonium spiritus sancti internum*, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.” (Ibid.)

“Needless to say, the non-Christian will find this explanation to be largely unpersuasive. “Isn’t a little suspicious,” he might object, “that Christians claim they are the only ones who can see the truth of these books and everyone else is blinded to it? That seems enormously self-serving.”” (Ibid.)

“This objection is understandable. But, if Christian doctrines concerning the fall, original sin, and the corruption of the human heart are true, then it naturally follows that a person without the Spirit cannot discern the

presence of the Spirit (such as whether He is speaking in a book).” (Ibid.)

1Corinthians 2:9-16

Matthew 13:10-17

Moreover, it is not all that different than the reality that some people are tone-deaf and therefore unable to discern whether a musical note is “on key.” You can imagine a tone-deaf person objecting, “This whole ‘on key’ thing is a sham run by musical insiders who claim to have a special ability to hear such things.” But, despite all the protests, the truth of the matter would remain: there is such a thing as being on key whether the tone-deaf person hears it or not.

“In the end, the church fathers teach us a very important truth. The NT canon we possess today is not due to the machinations of later church leaders, or to the political influence of Constantine, but due to the fact that these books imposed themselves on the church through their internal qualities.” Ibid.)

Resources

James White, Scripture Alone, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004

Michael J. Kruger
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-biblical-canon/>

Michael J. Kruger
<https://www.monergism.com/10-basic-facts-about-nt-canon-every-christian-should-memorize>