The Canonization of Scriptures / The How
(Part 4)

A. In this series we have covered two aspects of the Canonization of the Scriptures.
   1. In the first lesson we discussed the “what” of canonization of Scriptures.
      a. It was noted that the canon of scriptures was the standard by which those who followed God lived.
      b. When a writing was recognized as inspired it was immediately canonized or accepted as the standard by which God wanted them to live.
      c. Thus man did not develop the canon, God did.

   2. In our second lesson we discussed “why” there was a need for man to but the canon into a collection of recognized and accepted inspired writings.
      a. Since the books were prophetic they were valuable and it would be logical to preserve them.
      b. The early church had need of knowing the complete standard by which they were to live.
      c. There were false teachers declaring other doctrines and these needed to be silenced.
      d. Missionary Stimulus, great commission
      e. Because of persecution and politics there was a need to preserve the written word, lest it be lost or destroyed.

B. Having established these two points firmly we can now turn our attentions to the “how” of the canonization of Scriptures.

C. What we will be discussing in this lesson is how the canon was put together. The question most often asked concerning the canon is, “how did those who were preserving the canon know which books to include and which to reject, since there were many writings that were being circulated as inspired?”

   1. The New Testament books were written during a half-century period by some eight or nine different writers, having destinations ranging from individuals (e.g., Philemon) to groups of churches (e.g., 1Peter) located in centers extending from Jerusalem to Rome.

      Although the “church” did not give official recognition to the canon prior to the late fourth century, it is misleading to say there was no recognition before then.

   2. Within the New Testament itself, there is evidence of the concept of a developing canon of inspired books. This may be observed in the principle and process of canonization in the New Testament.
3. **The principle of canonization:** The determining factor in the New Testament canonization was inspiration, and the primary test was apostolicity. If it could be determined that a book had apostolic authority, there would be no reason to question its authenticity or veracity.

In New Testament terminology, the church was “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20) whom Christ had promised to guide unto “all the truth” (John 16:13) by the Holy Spirit. The church in Jerusalem was said to have continued in the “apostles’ teachings” (Acts 2:42).

The term apostolic as used for the test of canonicity does not necessarily mean “apostolic authorship,” or that which was prepared under the direction of the apostles.

Apostolic authority, or apostolic approval, were the primary test of canonicity, and not merely apostolic authorship. In the terminology of the New Testament, a book had to be written by an apostle or prophet, Eph. 2:20. The real question, then, was, “Is a book prophetic?” that is, “Was it written by a prophet of God?”

The apostles were, of course, granted a prophetic ministry (John 14-16). Individuals in the New Testament besides those called apostles were granted a prophetic ministry, in accordance with the promise of the Holy Spirit, (1Cor. 12:29).

4. **The process of canonization:** A close look at the New Testament reveals that these prophetic writings were being sorted from among the nonprophetic writings, even from oral traditions, and a canon was being formed during apostolic times. Several procedures were involved in this process. (Selecting, Reading, Circulating, Collecting, Quotation)

   a. **Selecting procedure:** John implies that there was a selecting process going on among the apostles themselves, dealing with the problem of which particular truths should be preserved in written form, John 20:30, 21:25; Luke 1:1-4. This seems to indicate that there were other written records of Christ’s life that were not entirely true.

   There are several references to the authority of apostolic oral tradition of teaching, (1Thess. 2:13; 1Cor. 11:2). These traditions meant that there was authoritative teaching by original eyewitnesses to Christ’s life.
b. **Reading procedure:** Another indication within the New Testament itself that a canon was being formed is the repeated injunction that certain books should be read in the churches. 1Thess. 5:27

The key to canonicity implicit in those injunctions appears to be authority, or prophecy. If a writing was prophetic, it was read with authority to the churches.

c. **Circulating procedure:** Those writings that were read as authoritative to the churches were circulated and collected by the churches. The book of revelation was circulated among the churches of Asia Minor, Rev. 1:11.

Paul commanded the Colossians to pass his writings around, Col. 4:16. This is a crucial passage, because it indicates that the authority of one epistle included a larger audience than just the one to which it was written.

Thus other epistles were to be exchanged, and prophetic messages were to be read with all authority.

d. **Collecting procedure:** The circulating procedure no doubt led to the habit of collecting prophetic and apostolic writings, such as those alluded to in 2Peter 3:15-16.

c. **Quotation procedure:** (Jude 17,18 - 2Pet.3:2,3) If Jude quoted Peter’s writing when he said, “You must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v.17), then he not only verified that Peter’s writing was accepted into the canon by that time, but that the books received were immediately and authoritatively quoted as Scripture.

Paul in 1Tim. 5:18 quoted from the gospel of Luke 10:7. It would be to much to expect that every book of the New Testament would be verified in this way, but enough of them referred to (at least some of Paul’s, one of Lukes and perhaps one of Peter’s - a substantial part of the New Testament) in order to demonstrate that there was a canon of New Testament books even during New Testament times.

5. **The Apostolic fathers and the canon:**

   a. Once we leave the first century what was said of the development of the New Testament canon, as seen in the inspired writings of the New Testament itself, is even more apparent in the writings of the younger contemporaries, the apostolic Fathers.
b. A sample survey will suffice to show that by the middle of the second century every book of the New Testament was referred to, as authoritative (canonical), by at least one of these Fathers.

c. One thing to consider about the mention of these New Testament books by the early church fathers. At the least this assures us of the knowledge and circulation of these books. At most, it assures us that those early Christians who quoted passages from these books believed them to be God’s inspired word and thus canonical.

d. It must also be stated that just because an early writer did not quote every book does not mean that it was not in existence or he did not consider it to be canonical. All it proves is that he didn’t quote from it.

c. (cf. attachments: Apostolic Fathers)

6. **Summary:**

   a. The primary test for canonicity in New Testament times was apostolic or prophetic authority. Those writings that came to local churches (or individuals) were read, circulated, collected, and even quoted as a part of the canon of the Scriptures. Those writings supplemented and formed an integral part of the inspired Word of God along with the previously recognized Old Testament Scriptures.

   b. As we move past the first century we find that the early church Fathers were actively writing religious articles, sermons etc. and in these they quoted what is now known as the NT. This helps us understand how those who set out to put the canon into an organized form came to the conclusions that they did in regards to which books were considered canonical.

From what we have seen so far it is clear that the canon was actually completed when the last New Testament book as written.

Yet many look to the church councils of the Synod of Hippo, A.D. 393 and the council of Carthage A.D. 397 as the defining moments in the completion of the canon.

From this point on the 27 books of the New Testament have remained the same and have been accepted as canon.

This leaves us with one final question concerning the canon, “How do we know those books which were found to be canonical have retained their textual reliability?” This will be discussed in our next lesson.