

WHY THESE BOOKS: Key Facts To Remember From The Lights At Lamar Presentation

Objective of the study: To know whether the books we have in the NT are what God wanted us to have.

Point 1: The Origins of the “Canon” Principle of Christianity began long before the third or fourth Century.

Christianity began among the Jews. Many Jews would become Christians. The concept of authoritative texts was not new among those first Christians. The Jews already had a concept of a Canon (books recognized as scripture). Christianity began orally. The apostles and eyewitnesses began to spread the good news by mouth. About 25 years after the death of Jesus letters and writings began. As the apostles died off, the writings from the apostles and prophets would become important. The speaking and writing of the apostles were viewed as authoritative, 1 Corinthians 14:37, 15:1-4; 2 Corinthians 3:3, 13:3. These texts automatically place boundaries of what would be authoritative. This began in the first century and not in the third or fourth century as many allege. In the first century we have examples like Peter describing Paul's writings as scripture, 2 Peter 3:15-16. Peter wanted Christians to read the writings of Paul. Among the earliest writings in the second century there was an implicit conscious authority of the New Testament writings.

Point 2: The earliest non-New Testament writings attest to the fact that the apostle's writings were authoritative.

As the apostles died off, the next generation of Christians recognized that their own writings were not authoritative like the apostles and prophets. Examples of this are shown in writings like 1 Clement 42, 47 and Ignatius. This next generation kept the writings of Paul. They kept these writings because they knew there was something special to them. Early in the second century Christians recognized what was authoritative and what was not.

Point 3: To know whether we have the right books, we should consider Usage and not Lists.

The apostles never left a list behind saying which books were to be considered a part of the Canon. Many like to look at lists that were made beginning in the late second century. Many of these lists may have begun because of the forgeries that were popping up. The apostle Paul warned the saints in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 to not be disturbed by letter or word that claims to be from me. It appears that potential forgery may have begun in the first century. Instead of lists, we should consider what books were in ongoing use by the Christians. Based on a statistical analysis of what the early Christians cited, based on usage in citations, there is a clear picture that emerges. What we see is that from the apostolic fathers in the second century onward there was an early, clear core of what we now call the New Testament books that the early Christians depended upon. This would include the gospels, the major Pauline letters, and Acts. For the Jewish Christians the New Testament scriptures were used more than the Old Testament canon. There is also a clear distinction between the books that we have as the New Testament when compared to other books that were floating around.

Point 4: There was a clear functional canon by the end of the second century.

The clear functional canon that the early Christians used and quoted from and recognized as scripture were the four gospels, Acts, the Pauline epistles (including Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation for a total of 22 books. Other books like James, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, and Jude were used and referenced also, but not as much as the other 22. These writings may not have been used as much because they were shorter.

Point 5: There is a clear break between the 27 New Testament books and all other writings.

James, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, and Jude in the second century were sometimes described as disputed books. While these books were disputed, there is clear break between these books and others that were completely rejected. This means that there were 27 books that were clearly distinctive and recognized compared to other writings floating around, like the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Barnabas, the gospel of Matthias, etc. This distinction was made well before the 3rd Century. The church did not impose the canon. In 367 Athanasius made a list of books that has all 27 books that we have. However, this was not done to impose these books as canon. It was for the purpose of helping others to know that, based upon what history demonstrated, these 27 books were viewed as scripture. James, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, and Jude were accepted well before the third and fourth century as scripture.

Point 6: How the canon came together should not be a concern for us.

Sometimes people get nervous about the entire process of how we got the 27 books in the New Testament. Some wonder, "Why couldn't God make the process easier?" Others say, "How can we really be sure?" There are a couple of things to consider. First, while there were false documents being floated around, even in the first century, there was always a core group of books viewed as scripture. Christians in the first century were able to distinguish the real from the fake, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2; 2 Peter 3:14-15. All of the crucial doctrines of Christianity are found in the core books and not in those that could be called "the edges of the canon". Christians took seriously making sure that books (like James, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, and Jude) were indeed scripture. Second, what we learn is that God has always worked through history providentially. God works within history and through human processes.

To Summarize:

1. The Canon was not defined by the early church but rather recognized by the early church.
2. The Core of the New Testament was recognized by the early second century.
3. Don't get caught up with the lists, but rather usage. Focus on what early Christians were using.
4. The canon emerged organically by usage and not by the church.
5. Even when the Protestant Reformation broached the issue of the received canon in the 1600's, the same 27 books were affirmed by all sides, both Protestant and Catholic.

A Sampling of writers from the second Century who referenced or alluded to scriptures.

1. 1 Clement (ca. 95): Clear reference to 1 Corinthians; alluded to Romans, Galatians, Philippians, Ephesians and Hebrews. Didache 8.2 (ca. 100): Clear reference to Matthew 6. Ignatius (ca. 110): Showed awareness of Ephesians, Matthew, Luke, and John. Epistle of Barnabas 4:14 (ca. 130): Made an apparent allusion to Matthew 22:14.
2. Justin Martyr 1 Apology 67 (ca. 150-160). Referenced how Christians on the first day of the week would read the memoirs of the apostles and writings of prophets.
3. Ireneus (ca. 170-180): Showed knowledge of the four gospels, Acts, the entire Pauline epistles but Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John, and Revelation.