How We Got the Bible

New Testament Canon

The historical circumstances that led to the canonization of the NT are not completely clear today. There is no surviving literature that identifies the canonical process.

In 397 some church leaders met at a council (Third Council of Carthage) in North Africa to consider some doctrinal matters. One thing they did was make a list of the N.T. books that were to be read in church services. They made a list that is the 27 books we have in our N.T. today.

The impression is a group of human beings decided the canonicity of the N.T. or there was uncertainty for some 300 years; or the authority of the scriptures lie in church leaders. The Catholic Church explicitly states that they produced the New Testament. Why do we have these 27 books; no less and no more?

We are going to look at four situations that forced these councils to consider the canonicity of the N.T. There were previous councils that considered this matter but this council agreed on the 27 books we have.

There is a difference between "an authoritative list of books" and "a list of authoritative books."

The earliest Christian communities did not possess a fixed canon of Scriptures. There was no official list of which writings were canonical. Consider the position of first and second century Christians.

1. Situation of many books. Luke 1:1-3.
2. Situation of omitted books. History records some of the writings and references early church fathers made to the books they accepted as Scripture. These lists were not always in complete agreement.
3. Destroyed books. By Diocletian and others. (see The Biblical Canon pp.310)
4. Disputed books. There were seven of the books that were spoken against; Hebrews, James, 2Peter, 2&3 John, Jude, Revelation. But every one of these books were cited by Christian writers as scripture. These books were accepted because of their…

    A. **Spiritual Content:** (Orthodoxy) The early church considered the value of the book for church life and ministry. The early Christians believed that the NT writings reliably conveyed the essential message of and about Jesus Christ. Writings that did not

contain truths that were applicable across changing times and circumstances fell into disuse.

B. **Apostolicity: (Antiquity)** The roll of the Apostles in the life of the church must be considered. It can be demonstrated, to all but the most critical people, that all of these books were authored during the life of at least one Apostle. The early Christians believed that the books and writings that gave them their best access to the story of Jesus and explained their identity and mission were those that came from the apostolic times. The early church excluded any writings that it believed were written after the time of the apostles. All NT writings were believed to be written by apostles or those closely connected to an Apostle. Tertullian (ca. 200) indicated the Gospels were written by either apostles or by "apostolic men" when he wrote, "John and Matthew first instill faith in us, but Luke and Mark, who are apostolic men, renew it afterward." The early church father Irenaeus (d. 202) wrote, "How should it be if the apostles themselves had not left us writings? Would it not be necessary in that case to follow the course of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they handed over the leadership of the churches?" In short, if it was believed than an apostle wrote a particular book it was accepted and treated as Scripture.

C. **Universality:** (Catholicity) the regular use of writings in the early churches was also an important factor in their selection for NT canonicity. The writings which comprise our NT were those that seemed to meet the spiritual needs of the churches. Many early Christians and churches came to recognize and accept the same writings.

The basis for these 3 factors which the early church used to recognize inspired writings is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit led men to write inspired Scripture and subsequently led early Christians to discover which writings were inspired Scripture.

Jesus entrusted the keys to Peter and the foundation of the church to the Apostles. Matthew 10:1-8; Mk 3:13-14; 6:7; Lk 6:13; 9:1.

1. Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would play a unique roll in the Apostles lives. John 14:25-26; 15:26-27; 16:13.
2. The Apostles were the foundation of the church. Ephesians 2:19-22; Re 21:14
3. The early church followed the Apostles doctrine. Acts 2:42; 1Th. 2:13
4. God bore the Apostles witness with miracles. Hebrews 2:3-4.
5. The Apostles directed their writings be widely disseminated as scripture. Gal. 1:1-2; Col. 4:16; 1Th 5:27; 2Pe. 1:15-16; Rev. 1:3.
6. They themselves corrected false reports. John 21:23-24; 2Th. 2:2; 3:17.

7. The Apostles verified one another. 1Tim. 5:18 Paul equates Luke(10:7) as Scripture; 2Pe 3:15-16 Peter refers to Paul's completed epistles as scripture; Jude (17-18) quotes from 2 Peter.

By its very nature, Holy Scripture, whether Old or New Testament, is a production given of God, not the work of human creation. The key to canonicity is divine inspiration. Therefore, the method of determination is not one of selection from a number of possible candidates (there *are no* other candidates, in actuality) but one of reception of authentic material and its consequent recognition by an ever-widening circle as the facts of its origin become known. (Milton Fisher, *The Canon of the New Testament*, taken from The Origin of the Bible, pp. 75)

The early churches having such close ties with the Apostles were able to recognize which books were authentic and authoritative. I believe the Holy Spirit aided the early Christians with the discernment to slowly recognize which of the writings were inspired. While there was always (and continues to be) debate in some circles, the recognition of the 27 books of the NT were recognized by a consensus by the end of the second century.

"It is remarkable fact that no early Church Council selected the books that should constitute the N.T. canon. The books that we now have crushed out all rivals, not by any adventitious authority, but by their own weight and worth. This is in itself a strong proof of the genuineness and authenticity of the books that have survived. It is not until the close of the fourth century that any Council even discussed the subject." *Henry Clarence Thiessen* (The Canon of the New Testament, http://gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/canon.html)

Canon means "authority."

Bibliography

Brown, Harold O.J., et.al, The Origin of the Bible, Tyndale House Publishers, 2003

McDonald, Lee Martin, The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, 2007

Williams, James B., From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man, Ambassador-Emerald Intl., Greenville, SC, 1999

Lightfoot, Neil R., How We Got the Bible, 3rd ed., Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2003

Archaeological Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010

Minnick, Mark, From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man, 2002, CD