

Canon Determination for Evangelicals

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Introduction

The New Testament (NT) canon remained largely unsettled until at least about the fourth century, so it is believed. For about a thousand years after that, the core books of the canon were more or less stable with occasional infusions here and there by the Roman Catholic Church and others. Though the Roman Catholic Church always placed Church tradition and polity above the scripture (Berkhof 1979), the issue of the canon was settled for them during the council of Trent of 1545 in reaction to the Reformed position that accepted only the standard Hebrew canon plus the accepted 27 New Testament books arrived at nearly a thousand years earlier. While Jerome's Latin Vulgate became the official Roman Catholic canon basis, the Reformers asserted that only the initially agreed canon of the century before the Roman Catholic church emerged evolving into the monster that it became was the basis of faith alone given the witness of the Spirit. But then, even among evangelicals, various positions have mushroomed over the years leaving the unschooled saint and indeed those exposed to such debates reeling in confusion. One authority says this while the other asserts the opposite, so what is the believer to hold? This paper traces the Evangelical position historically mentioning key theologians in the process that shaped the thinking of the Reformed Church tradition of Biblical inspiration, revelation and therefore inerrancy. No attempt is made to give a detailed analysis of this matter but the reader is encouraged to explore this issue further in other works or periodicals.

Traditionally Held Positions Over inspiration, Faith and Canonicity by Evangelicals

The Protestant church rallied around the watch word of '*sola scriptura*' triumphing over the superstition of the once mighty Roman Catholic Church. As long as the Church held on to the authentic canon given to the church as encapsulated in the 66 book library, the church remained defiant and easily trampled over heresy and error. However, with the passage of time, cracks emerged within the Protestant ranks, interestingly emanating from doctrinal positions and practice. Some Protestants carried some relics from Romanism in their church practice such as the Eucharist including transubstantiation. The more thoroughly reformed theologians like Zwingli and Calvin objected to these tenets and held that only

what was in the extant Protestant scripture was to be accepted or practiced. This schism deepened and in due course, the *Evangelicals* emerged claiming and asserting that the pristine *sola Scriptura* spirit had been hijacked, abandoned and rejected in effect. The Evangelicals reasserted afresh that the scriptures alone would set the tone as a rule of faith and were to be obeyed without question. Thus, the scriptures were elevated above tradition, feelings or church policy. What the scriptures taught about salvation for instance was the way to go not other wise. With this assertion, the evangelicals strongly declared that the scriptures were inspired by God, inerrant and therefore authoritative. What appeared to be contradictions or variances were merely apparent and could be resolved by detailed meticulous study. Furthermore, the Evangelicals claimed that since God had inspired the word, it was one unit and thus was complete a revelation since the advent of Jesus Christ. What Jesus taught, said or written about Him was true and had to be believed or accepted as true. Anything outside this canon was to be rejected and not treated as inspired by God, though some aspects of those extra biblical writings of sources had some historical value. The evangelicals, in sync with some Reformers, asserted that the Spirit of God had revealed the canon and any spurious writings were exposed by that same Spirit. Other developments have emerged after that time but for our purposes, we highlight that this is the Evangelical core belief from inception, inspiration, revelation, inerrancy and authority.

Major influencers towards the evangelical position

In stating what we have highlighted above, it will surprise some readers to discover that the issue of inspiration has conspicuously been silent in scripture. What we have are declarations and not any specific teaching per se. For instance, Paul states that All scripture is given by Inspiration of God in II Timothy 3:16 while Peter says something to that effect as he mentions Prophecy (II Peter 1:18-21). Could it be that this doctrine was commonly held and thus assumed? Or could it be that it was one of those doctrines that has developed over the years with a view to defend canonicity? The reader is asked to investigate this matter and may arrive at their own conclusion, as some people tend to do in these latter days. However, in our discourse, we highlight some major influencers of the canon idea, what they held, taught or why they did so. A bird's eye view will suffice for our purposes.

The first theological giant is BB Warfield alongside his Princeton towering giants Charles and AA Hodge. These theologians did a detailed study of the subject of inspiration and therefore canonicity of the New Testament. They claim, in sync with the earlier Reformers, that the witness of the Spirit was key to the selecting and collating the canon. They further claim that all the books included in the canon were written by the apostles or those closely associated with them. This means that any writings not authored or sanctioned by the apostles was to be rejected as not scripture as a general rule. This has tended to exclude all other

so-called spurious works written outside the apostolic era such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, *Enoch* or any other such works. The Princeton theologians contended that any one accepting any other writings except those accepted in the canon were guilty of imbibing error and in some cases heresy. This has tended to protect the scripture in its present form.

The next set was by R Laird Harris who towed the line of the Princeton theologians but went further to claim that if an apostle wrote a given work and it was accepted by the Church as authoritative then it was to be included in the canon on that score. Interestingly, Laird rejected the Reformation principle of the witness of the Spirit to a book as a basis for acceptance for a book to the canon. In the main, he looked to the apostolic authorship or their sanction. His position has some weaknesses especially when we consider books Mark, Luke or Hebrews. That said, he had his own justifications for his position.

The Third major influencers were Norman L Geisler and William E Nix (in: *From God to us: How we got our Bible*) who asserted that it was God not man that determined the canon. They claim that God inspired people to write and arrive at the books accepted into the canon. God worked in such a way in people's hearts that they recognized what was scripture and what was not. In other words, they asserted that the writings were intrinsically authoritative with an inspired stamp long before men thought them so consequently accepting them into the canon. This view lifts the basis of acceptance out of the hands of Men to God.

These key players have influenced or shaped the general view among evangelicals leading to them determining what was canonical and what was not. In summary, we may say that the basis of accepting a book into the NT canon was influenced by whether the book was written in the apostolic era, by an apostle or their sanction, and finally if the book was accepted by the church as authoritative and inspired. This view however is being challenged in this post modern era as shall be noticed later in this discourse.

Developing trends

After the Princeton theologians and others were gathered to their fathers, the debate and interest around inspiration and canonicity continued. Many of their students carried on their strong evangelical position and is the standard today. However, others of their students deviated developing alternative positions somewhat in direct opposition to the accepted standard. They claim that there is need to be liberated from the limiting traditional Evangelical position of canonicity. These pundits claim that the Spirit is still continually speaking and as such new scripture is possible even today. This is largely the Charismatic view that grew strong after the 1960 watershed. Others like Sawyer assert that the canon has never been closed by God meaning that anyone is at liberty to accept a canon of their choice or not. In their view, a person should not be declared a

heretic if they rejected the Protestant canon in its present form. Further, so they claim, a person does not need to hold inerrancy or even the complete canon to be saved. The reason? God has not closed the canon! What we hold are merely 'teachings and preferences of men' that arose in times when or where the scripture was under attack in addition to fending off unacceptable doctrines. But then there are others that reduce the scriptures to be mere human writings which become "inspired" when they "jumped out of the page" as some one read them. At that point, so they claim, that passage becomes inspired. This is the Neo orthodox position advanced by Karl Barth and others. There are other positions still developed every day given a relative post modern context.

Suggested Alternative Basis for Canonicity

Having highlighted some positions developed over the years, some have suggested alternative arguments and premise for some kind of canon. Interestingly, Sawyer comes handy and offers his perspectives on this matter. The following have been suggested as alternative positions on how Evangelicals are to treat the canon issue:

1. Faith
2. Witness of the spirit
3. Authority and authenticity of the book, though Sawyer doubts the apostolic authorship test as valid.
4. Acceptance by the Church

From the points suggested above, one scarcely would call this an 'alternative' position because most of these are what has traditionally been taught. One interesting feature is that the apostolic test argument is questioned and in a sense discarded.

What are Evangelicals to Believe?

Evangelicals are to believe only what has been accepted as scripture as written in the 27 books of the New Testament, having accepted the Hebrew Bible of course. The Lord led His people to accept the canon as we have it today. Any other 'revelation' outside this canon is secondary and not to be treated at par with the word of God as we know it. This would open other problems. Granted, God still speaks today but he has spoken through his son (Hebrews 1:1-3). His word is sufficient.

What Others have Said or Written About Canonicity

As earlier alluded to writings, BB Warfield, Sawyer, EJ Young and others have written on this subject of inspiration and thus canonicity, especially Warfield. The tests that they derive from scripture and other historical studies are worth paying attention to. If we lose sight of their arguments, we soon veer into syncretism, mysticism or some such heresy like Gnosticism. The scriptures are plenary and verbally inspired (Young 1963). They are intrinsically authoritative and a rule of life for the saint. The Westminster Confession of Faith gives credence and pungent force to this latter statement.

Lessons From the Canonicity Debate

The issue of canonicity is not as simple as many of us tend to assume. Much thought and assumptions have shaped the way many people think. The Christian must have a presuppositional view of scripture if they are to accept it as intrinsically authoritative or inspired.

Holy Scripture is inspired by God and therefore perfect.

Holy Scripture is inherently authoritative. It does not draw its potency or recognition from human elements but divine.

The canon of scripture is closed with no new revelation to be added thereto. Both the Hebrew Bible and the 27 books of the New Testament constitute the Protestant Bible. All other books are excluded.

The deuterocanonical or spurious letter, Gospels or writings are of human origin, not accepted as scripture and therefore not binding.

These ancient works however may be read as aids or references to the past but not consistently in sync with other scripture. They are therefore not fully true accounts of what transpired or was.

There was a specific criteria used to arrive at the final canon of scripture. The old Testament was settled much earlier (Council of *Jamnia* about AD 90) while the New Testament was settled in the 4th century probably at Hippo and Carthage 393-419). The canon has been stable since.

Emerging dissenting voices within Protestant and Roman Catholic enclaves claim that the Protestant Bible is not the definitive one. They either add or assert that the canon status is inconclusive, yes, still open.

Conclusion

The Bible remains the watch word of the Protestants. It is *sola scriptura* even today. God has inspired His word and it is to be accepted as such.

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