



When discussing the Bible, occasionally someone will say, “The Church clearly compiled the Bible in order to further its own biased agenda. Church leaders chose only books that suited their mission, which was to exercise power and control. They omitted books that did not support their claims about Christianity and how Christians should live. Hence, the Bible is not a true representation of God, Jesus, or the Church’s real purpose.”

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The term used for the list of books included in the Bible is “canon,” which comes from the Hebrew קָנֶה (*qāneh*) meaning “reed” or “cane.” “The word was used of an instrument made of reed or other material, and denoted especially such an instrument used as a rod or ruler, as an aid in making straight lines or accurate measurements. Thus the word canon came to mean a standard of straightness or accuracy” (Filson 15-16). Eventually, the Greek word κανών (*kanōn*) came to denote “the rule of faith, the standards by which we are to measure and evaluate everything that may be offered to us as an article of belief” (Bruce 95).

The third century church father, Origen, used the word “canon” to mean the standard by which the church measured and evaluated scripture. It is important to notice that the church did not create the canon. “Instead, the church recognized, or discovered, which books had been inspired from their inception” (McDowell 21). In other words, “a book is not the Word of God because it is accepted by the people of God. Rather it was accepted by the people of God because it is the Word of God ... the church merely recognized the divine authority which God gives to it” (Geisler/Nix 210).

Before the Council of Hippo affirmed the canon, the literal Word of God was without doubt a significant part of Christian worship and life. Justin Martyr (AD 100-165)

A word on the Word

A monthly series on the Bible by Carrie Boren, Missioner for Evangelism

What is the canon of the Bible?

wrote, “And on the day called Sunday there is a gathering together to one place of all those who live in cities or in the country, and the memoirs of the apostles writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits” (Donaldson and Roberts 1.67). The reason the people of the early church collected and preserved these books was not because of their desire to manipulate doctrine but because they wanted to know which books they should read, revere, and apply to their precarious lives in a hostile social and religious environment. Moreover, the church felt a responsibility to set a standard for the books of scripture to counter the influence of heretics who were making their “collection of books” to suit their own needs. For example, as early as AD 140, the heretic Marcion created his own canon that contained most of Luke’s Gospel — except for what he called “Judaizing corruptions” — and 10 Pauline Epistles.

From the writings of early church historians, we can see that at least five principles guided the church’s recognition and collection of the true divinely inspired books:

- 1) Was the book written by a prophet, a spokesman of God?
- 2) Was the writer confirmed by the acts of God?
- 3) Did the message tell the truth about God? “God cannot contradict Himself (2 Cor. 1:17-18) nor can He utter what is false (Heb. 6:18).”
- 4) Did it come with the power of God? Did it change lives?
- 5) Was it accepted by the people of God? Had the people of God already received, collected, read, and used it as the word of God? (Geisler/Nix 223-231).

In the New Testament, the chief test for recognizing divine inspiration (canonicity) in a book was apostolicity. “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 into ‘all truth’ by the Holy Spirit. ... The term *apostolic* as used for the test of canonicity does not necessarily mean ‘apostolic authorship’ ... [but] apostolic authority, or apostolic approval” (Geisler/Nix 283).

In AD 393, the church council at the synod of

Hippo recognized the canon that had been unofficially accepted for many years. It listed 27 books of the New Testament. F.F. Bruce states that, “It did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity. The ruling of the Synod of Hippo was re-promulgated four years later by the Third synod of Carthage” (Bruce 113). Since then, neither Roman Catholics nor Protestants nor Eastern Orthodox have seriously questioned the authority and canonicity of the 27 accepted books of the New Testament.

“Recent writings have subjected this claim to fresh versions of familiar challenges. Part of the recent energy for discovering ‘alternative’ modes of early Christianity, and for suggesting that other texts were ‘excluded’ from the mainstream in the interests of squelching vibrant forms of early Christian living, comes ... from the late-modern eagerness for religions of ‘self-discovery’ over against those of redemption. ... This proposal is sometimes made by ... postmodern skeptics asserting that the canon itself ... [was] all a power play for control within the church and social respectability in the world. ... We should note, as of some importance in the early history of the Bible-reading church, that those who were being burned alive, thrown to the lions, or otherwise persecuted, tortured and killed were normally those who were reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and the rest. The kind of spirituality generated by ‘[The Gospel of] Thomas’ and similar [non-canonical] books would not have worried the Roman imperial authorities” (Wright 62-63).

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