

CANON CRITICISM

Virgil Warren, PhD

I. Definition of Canonicity

Canonicity constitutes normative literature. It sets the doctrinal “norms” by which we consider issues and measure viewpoints. In Christianity, canonicity correlates with inspiration. The canon consists of writings that came from “inspired” men, men whose writings were as correct and authoritative as they would have been if God himself had “*exhaled them*” (2 Timothy 3:16).

II. Principles for Canonicity (See separate document “The Determining Principles for Canonicity.”)

The identity and relative importance of the principles of canonicity—historical, doctrinal, and subjective—form the framework for determining and evaluating (a) canonicity, (b) continued revelation, and (c) non-revelational special divine guidance. (See “Testing Current Manifestation” in notes associated with “Gifts of the Spirit.”)

III. Characteristics of Canonicity

A. Apostolicity

Those New Testament writings are canonical that have come from apostles in the primary sense and from those who served as extensions of the apostolic office, one broad use of the term “apostle.” The apostle Matthew covers his own gospel; John covers the Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation; Peter covers 1 Peter and 2 Peter as well as Mark (because Mark was known as the interpreter for Peter) and James and Jude (because Peter was the apostle to the circumcision). Paul covers Romans through Philemon as direct author as well as Hebrews either because he was the author or because the book came from the Pauline circle as from Apollos. Paul also covers Luke-Acts because the Luke also served in the Pauline circle. So Mark, Luke-Acts, James, and Jude are apostolic because they came from extensions of the apostolic office. They worked, so to speak, under the supervision of apostles.

Apostolicity does not mean what comes from the apostolic age. There were Judaizing and Gnostic teachers infiltrating the churches during the apostolic age itself.

B. Catholicity

What was accepted as canonical by everyone everywhere in the apostolic age is received as canonical by the church later. Catholicity is a practical aid that helps determine what books came from apostolic hands. It offsets special interest groups and localized viewpoints in the early church. (Note separate document “Orthodox Christianity.”)

IV. Canonicity and Tradition

A. Tradition as an authoritative norm

The Roman Catholic view of the church gives the church logical priority over both scripture and tradition. Tradition has authority over the consciences of Christ's people because it supposedly represents the Spirit-led understanding the church has had throughout the ages since the apostolic period. Within tradition stands the role of the ancient councils in formulating creeds and orthodox stances on profound questions like Christology, trinity, incarnation, and canonicity itself. The view includes belief in apostolic succession and the concept that grace flows through the church by authority rather than directly from God to his people interpersonally.

B. Tradition as an interpretative tool

Protestantism/reformation has regarded early tradition as an interpretative tool. The assumption has been that those who knew the apostles or were close to the apostolic age could have had access to unrecorded information that would aid in understanding the Christian message represented in the written word.

Restoration/primitivism has put an even more reduced emphasis on the value of tradition. The presence of so much heretical teaching even during the time of the apostles themselves suggests a high degree of caution about the doctrinal views of those after the time when apostles were no longer present to correct false teaching. Under the last approach, tradition may have a confirmatory role but no more so than other non-canonical thought.

V. Canonicity and Guidance

A. Revelational guidance

Overt manifestation of God's will for specific situations comes in a way that the receivers can distinguish their own thoughts and feelings from the revelational experience; it is "face to face" as with Moses, audible as in "*Samuel, Samuel*" in the night, or "*Saul, Saul*" on the Damascus road—audible and visible to some extent to his traveling companions.

B. Special guidance

Special guidance lies beyond natural law and the outworking of generic Christian values in (1) biblical teaching and (2) the Christian community together with (3) the sheer sense of divine presence. It includes supernatural intervention that is invisible to the human senses. (See elsewhere materials under "Guidance" associated with "Gifts of the Spirit" as well as materials in "Basic Christianity.")

VI. Views of Canonicity

A. Closed canon

1. Not adding to or taking away: Revelation **22:18-19**; compare Deuteronomy **4:2; 12:32**; Proverbs **30:6**

We must take care in using the Revelation passage to argue for a closed canon, because (a) the words deal with the Book of Revelation itself. Besides, (b) the Old Testament passages say the same thing; yet they do not eliminate the continued revelation from God through the succession of Israelite prophets, to say nothing of the New Covenant as a whole. Carried to the extreme, this position could become a kind of Christian deism.

According to Eusebius, in the ancient church there were five New Testament books that some people questioned as to their place in the canon: Hebrews, 2 Peter, James, Jude, and Revelation. In all of church history, there have been four books that even the most liberal scholars have never questioned as to genuineness and placement in the canon: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Galatians.

2. Faith once and for all time delivered to the saints: Hebrews **7:27; 9:12, 28; 10:10**; Jude 3
3. No apostolic succession

a. Where there are no prophets/apostles/special messengers, there is no expansion of the canon. Regarding the period after Malachi, Josephus said there was no exact succession of prophets; so no scripture comes from that era in Israel; hence, the Old Testament Apocrypha does not count as scripture.

b. Judas was replaced when he left the apostolic office; but James, John's brother, was not replaced when Herod had him killed. Scripture always speaks of twelve apostles, not an expanding number as pictured in apostolic succession.

4. When what is perfect has come, the imperfect is removed (1 Corinthians **13:10**; Hebrews **8:4-13; 9:23-28; 10:8-14**); when the perfect has come, it is not superseded (Hebrews **7:18-24**). The principle in these texts does not deal specifically with canonicity, but the idea relates to whether there will be ongoing normative revelation that supersedes what has already come.

B. Open canon

1. Having an open canon was the situation of the Old Testament system in which Moses as normative prophet was followed by others with additional communication from God (Deuteronomy **18:15-19**; Jeremiah **31:31- 34**).

2. This position describes quasi-Christian groups that attempt to add further revelation to the New Covenant. They claim their new revelation is to the New Testament what the New Testament was to the Old.

C. Closed canon with continued revelation

1. Roman Catholicism belongs here or under “open canon” since the pope speaking ex cathedra adds to the fundamental New Covenant corpus.

2. Tradition mediated through the councils—and perhaps otherwise—expands the normative literature for the church. The New Testament plus tradition is comparable to the Pentateuch plus the prophets and the tradition of the elders. The verdicts of the councils together with the proclamations of popes are functional equivalents of the New Testament for what the tradition of the elders was for the Old Testament.

3. Pentecostalism also takes this position regarding continued revelation at least on matters of guidance and Christian practice.

VII. The Canonical Place of the Old Testament for the Church (See “The Law-Gospel Relationship.”)

VIII. Canonicity Distinguished from Related Matters in Bibliology

A. Inerrancy

Inerrancy deals with the character of scripture; determining what books belong in scripture represents a prior task. Just because someone denies that, say, 2 Peter belongs in the canon, he would not necessarily be denying inerrancy.

B. Literary genre

All literary genres have potential for canonical status: history, poetry, devotional writing, wisdom literature, apocalyptic, didactic materials.

C. Hermeneutics

There are no peculiar principles for interpreting canonical literature beyond what operate in human language generally.

IX. Collection of the Canon (See “Primary Questions in the Collection of the New Testament Canon.”)