

ANSWERING THE TOUGH ONES "ON THE CANON"



If one believes in the inspiration of the writing of Scripture, would he also have to believe, at least to a certain degree, in the compilation of it?

Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, every book in the Scripture was authoritative when the author penned it. The process of canonization did not seek to impart authority to the books in Scripture, it sought to recognize which ones were already authoritative, so the process was one of discovery, not determination. Even the qualifications used to discover authority (such as apostolic origin, church acceptance, doctrinal orthodoxy, practical accuracy, etc.) were tools to ascertain what was canonical and what was not. Although there was minor disagreement among the church fathers regarding which books were canonical, during the first couple of centuries after the common era break the authoritative books began to prove themselves, so that the third Council of Carthage in AD 397 (the first council to confirm the sixty-six books of the canon plus the Apocrypha; see the handout on the Apocrypha) was more of a formality, or seal of approval regarding the books that best met the criteria and had distinguished themselves over time. The canon as a whole is not more authoritative than any one of its parts; however, the canon is incomplete without each of its parts. In other words, each book needs the others in order to be the complete canon, but authority is not imparted on a book because it is in the canon, it is in the canon because it is authoritative. While I hope this information is helpful, ultimately this issue comes down to faith. Just as one must have faith that God guided the writing of Scripture, he must also have faith that He guided the process of compiling the Scripture. Just know that this faith is not "blind," there is substantial historical evidence that points to God's hand in both the writing and compilation of Scripture.

Who were the people who assembled the sixty-six books of our Bible and did they have an agenda as they decided what was in and what was out?

This is an important question. You have to remember that the church in the first three centuries looked drastically different than it does today. Under Roman rule the early church suffered a significant amount of brutality and persecution, anything from being mutilated by animals to serving as a nightlight (they were burned on posts to provide light) to crucifixion to social ostracizing to loss of material goods. The early church took its faith extremely serious (since it cost them so much), unlike many nominal Christians today. Now, there were definitely nominal Christians in the early church as well, but they were fewer and farther between, and usually abandoned their faith within a short period of time, or they changed their doctrine slightly to accommodate their lifestyle, something not unlike what is happening today. Anyway, the early church was faced with various heretical groups, so it responded by vigorously defending established orthodoxy. Men like Clement, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Ignatius, Eusebius, Iraneaus, Athanasius, Augustine, and many more defended the core tenants of the Christian faith, some even dying for their stand against those who would compromise the integrity of the message. These were the men who preserved the message for hundreds of years so that when Constantine became emperor in the fourth century and the persecutions

began to subside, many of the councils and synods met to confirm what these men had fought so hard to preserve. One might argue that these doctrines and the canon might have been officially confirmed much earlier had it not been for the persecution that kept the church suppressed, but that's hypothetical. The discovery of the authoritative books was both concrete and fluid. I mean, the vast majority of the canon was universally accepted as authoritative (concrete), while a handful of books (including the Apocrypha) were disputed (fluid). It should be noted, though, that neither accepting nor rejecting the disputed books changed any central Christian doctrine.

I realize that this process was not simplistic nor naïve, and I recognize that many of the men who fought against heresies and threats against Christianity in the first couple of centuries did not always agree exactly as to which books were authoritative, but over time the sixty-six books began to distinguish themselves and were ultimately confirmed as canonical without reservation. Some might say that these guys were on a power trip or were trying to deceive people into believing something that isn't true, but an informed understanding of the history of the early church does not allow for this. There were too many people involved over too long a time period for someone to go on a power trip and pull off tricking everyone. It's much safer to say that this process was divinely orchestrated. I can't fully understand that, but that is where the evidence leads.

On a personal note, at times I am struck with questions regarding the authenticity or reliability of certain aspects of Christianity. I think one of the things that really helps me is to take it back to faith. When I do, I find that every time the evidence is considered, it would actually take more faith to reject these aspects than accept them. I find myself backed in a corner and frustrated because I can't really get my arms around every aspect of these issues, and yet I have learned to live with the tension.

A resource you might want to check out is *The Canon of Scripture* by F.F. Bruce. You also might want to reference 2 Timothy 3:16, Colossians 4:16, 2 Peter 3:15-16, and 1 Timothy 5:18.

If you have any questions or want to discuss this further just let me know.

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