

The New Testament Canon: Authoritative Books or Mandated Collection?

Introduction: *Why Talk About the New Testament Canon?*

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Canon: Why Give It More Attention?

- Yes, we have many important things to talk about—and limited time to do so
- Our current circumstances require us to at least be aware of the issue
 - For the sake of truth
 - To help each other prepare for challenging questions
 - To prepare to engage with our society

Canon in Contemporary Culture

- Why these questions?
 - 1940s—discoveries at Qumran and Nag Hamadi, Egypt (Gnostic)
- In the popular consciousness for some time; examples:
 - Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci code*—2003 (+ 80 million copies)
 - Influenced by *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*—1983
- Intentional and masterful PR efforts—books, interviews, enhanced by internet and social media
 - “New wave of books, almost a separate genre” (Darrell Bock)

Examples of Alternate Claims

- Different interpretation of the fact that we have no documented complete list of all 27 books until three centuries after Jesus & the apostles
- A 4th century *creation* mandated at Nicaea (325 AD) by Constantine for reasons of politics and power
- Corollary: other gospels had to be discarded to favor Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

If the claims are true ...

- The *number* of books in the canon (yardstick for faith and practice) will be different
- Understanding of the nature of Christian faith will be different
- The church's credibility is subject to question
 - Can we deny the alternate views if they are *true* (John 8.32)?
 - Even if not true, will we be taken seriously if we don't engage and/or just dismiss the alternate views? Are we hiding something?

Responding to the Claims

1. Take the challenge seriously and study the history of canon development
 - Complex (with a considerable amount of literature)
 - “Messier” than we might like
 - But it is true that “the Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven”
(Dan Brown)

Responding to the Claims

2. Acknowledge and show context for facts, including:

- Not until 367 AD do we have a list naming all 27 writings as definitely canonical
- Other early Christian writings (e.g., *Barnabas*, *1 Clement*) were read as Scripture; some in ancient MSS (Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus)
- 20 of the 27 books generally considered canonical by 130-150 AD (except: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, Revelation)
- The church in the West accepted all the books before the church in the East did

Responding to the Claims

3. Prepare to show where the alternate claims can be challenged
 - Incorrect to say or leave the impression that the church generally was uncertain about the books until the 5th/6th centuries
 - Incorrect to say that all the books were disputed after the apostolic era; in fact most were accepted as authentic quite early

Preparing the Church to Give an Answer

- Critics: the church doesn't know because the church hasn't taught it—either intentionally (!) or through neglect
- “Truth has nothing to fear from examination.”
- To protect ourselves from being blindsided
- To at least be informed enough to know there is another side to the story
- For our witness: if serious about engaging the culture ...

For a written copy of the lecture—with a beginning bibliography—and copy of the slides

www.davidanguish.com

“The Church did not create the canon, but came to recognize, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the Church.”

- Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (1987), 287