

The Canon of the NT
Exploring Current Issues Conference
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1) Prolegomena

The key is the framework for interpretation, not the endless quibbling over various facts/evidence

Christianity is a historical religion before it is a moral religion. The authority of its moral claims comes directly from the historicity of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-2 — Christians need to realize their responsibility to know these things on some level

2) Origin of the “canon” principle

The concept of a limited “canon” of Scripture was not an innovation of some institutionalized “Church”—because of the recognition of inspiration, the Jews already recognized that there was a closed canon of Scripture centered around the Mosaic covenant. Christians would naturally recognize that there would be limited what the Holy Spirit imparted in the apostolic era as well. The “canon” principle is inherent in the concept of inspiration.

3) Implicit, conscious authority in NT writings

1 Corinthians 14:37
2 Corinthians 13:3
2 Corinthians 3:6
1 Corinthians 15
2 Peter 3:15-16

4) Early, sub-apostolic understanding of canonical principle

1 Clement 42
1 Clement 47
Ignatius, Epistle to the Romans 4.3

5) Defining vs. Recognizing the Canon: Lists vs. Usage

Usage comes first and apostolic authenticity was the key

Proliferation of other writings, both orthodox and heretical may have provided the impetus for eventual list making

Signs of an early Pauline collection – 2 Peter 3

John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text*.

6) A Chronology for Canonicity

A clear, functional canon by the end of the second century/beginning of the third century

Outline of the canon visible in the quantity and distribution of the manuscript evidence that has come down to us

1 Clement (c. 95)

Didache (c. 100)

Ignatius (d. c.110)

Polycarp (c. 110)

Epistle of Barnabas (c. 130)

Justin Martyr (c. 150-160)

Irenaeus (c. 170-180)

Muratorian Fragment (c. 170-180)

The Core of the NT already in the 2nd Century: 4 gospels, Acts, Pauline epistles (including Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation — 22 out of the 27 NT books

7) Clarifying the “Edges” of the Canon

What about the other five (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John)?

Origin (c. 185-254), Homilies on Joshua 7

Eusebius (c. 263-339), *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25

Athanasius' Festal Letter (367)

8) Is the "Messiness" of the Process a Problem?

Not a problem historically

Not a problem theologically

9) Summary

The canon was *not* "defined" by the early church, it was *recognized* by the early church

The core of the NT canon was quickly recognized, being apparent by the mid-second century

The key thing to look for is *usage*, even before the "lists"

Even when the Protestant Reformation broached the issue of the received canon again, the same twenty-seven books of the NT were reaffirmed by all sides, Protestant and Catholic

10) Basic Talking Points

Apostolicity

Usage before lists

Lists were for clarification, not creation

Core was always clear

history is not as neat as science: the concept of a machine vs organic symphony with loose ends; more "tolerance" (in the engineering sense of that word) for messiness of real life; it is hard to overstate the difference between the modern mind of the past 400 years and the ancient (and even medieval) mind that prevailed for most of the preceding human history

Don't deny the messiness