

If You Believe in Canonicity, You Can and Should Believe in Preservation

by Kent Brandenburg

The front of my Bible says sixty-six books. I grew up with that number in my head because I had never seen otherwise – thirty-nine Old Testament, twenty-seven New Testament. As far as I'm concerned, the canon of Scripture, the number of books is settled. However, it has not been without controversy in history. Martin Luther doubted the canonicity of James, calling it the "epistle of straw." Eusebius, Catholic historian, in 340 said that James was a disputed text. Augustine and the council of Hippo (390) accepted the apocrypha as part of the canon. The 1395 Wycliffe version of the Bible in English included the Apocrypha.

Of the patristics, several accepted Shepherd of Hermas as part of the canon. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Didymus the Blind all three quoted it as Scripture. It is also included in Codex Sinaiticus. The Epistle of Barnabas is also found in Sinaiticus, as well as advocated by Didymus. If Sinaiticus is a better text, one representing the rules of textual criticism, then Shepherd of Hermas and The Epistle of Barnabas should be considered Scripture.

If Jesus actually did quote from the Septuagint, like many critical text advocates believe, then we also need to consider that the Septuagint included the apocrypha. Jesus therefore would have supported a canon with the apocryphal books part of their number. If it is true that the apostles quoted from the Septuagint, then the Septuagint, along with its apocryphal books, was the Old Testament of the apostles. Why should it not then be our Old Testament? And if Jesus' use of the Septuagint evinces the acceptability of a Bible laced with faulty words, then consistency requires the acceptance of a Bible with several more than sixty-six books.

Arguments for the Canon

And yet we have heavy evangelical support for a sixty-six book canon. What are the arguments? F. F. Bruce wrote in his **The New Testament Documents**:

The historic Christian belief is that the Holy Spirit, who controlled the writing of the individual books, also controlled their selection and collection, thus continuing to fulfil our Lord's promise that He would guide His disciples into

all the truth.

He saw the Holy Spirit as leading His disciples to the correct books. Greg Brahnson wrote:

[W]e know from God's Word (1) that the church of the New Covenant recognized the standing canon of the Old Testament, and (2) that the Lord intended for the New Covenant church to be built upon the word of the apostles, coming thereby to recognize the canonical literature of the New Testament. To these premises we can add the conviction (3) that all of history is governed by God's providence ("... according to the plan of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His own will," Eph. 1:11).

His main argument is for us to look what the church agreed was the Word of God. **M. James Sawyer** says we look at usage.

The common evangelical view of the development of the New Testament canon sees the canon as having arisen gradually and through usage rather than through conciliar pronouncement which vested the books of the New Testament with some kind of authority.

Charles Briggs in *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture* argued that there was a three-fold program for canon determinations, the first being the testimony of the church (p. 163). He explained that this was the evidence of general consent, although given under the leading of the Spirit. It was from this general consent that conciliar pronouncements were made. Briggs final determining factor and highest principle of canon determination was that of the witness of the Spirit. He stated, "The Spirit of God bears witness by and with the particular writing . . . , in the heart of the believer, removing every doubt and assuring the soul of its possession of the truth of God" (p. 163).

Thiessen wrote in his **Introduction to the New Testament**:

The Holy Spirit, given to the Church, quickened holy instincts, aided discernment between the genuine and the spurious, and thus led to gradual, harmonious, and in the end unanimous conclusions. There was in the Church what a modern divine has happily termed an 'inspiration of selection'.

We see repeatedly this understanding that the Holy Spirit revealed the canon through the church. Churches, genuine believers, settled on the sixty-six books of the Bible.

In addition to this, we see that canonicity was still being discussed into the Reformation period. Sawyer writes: "The canon of the New Testament was not closed historically by the early church. Rather, its extent was debated until the Reformation." In other words, the canon was sixty-six books, but there was continued validation and verification of that through agreement of believers into the printed edition period of Scripture. We have the same thing with preservation. The printed edition period affirmed the *textus receptus* as the text of the New Testament.

Why 66?

We hear and read many evangelicals who agree that the church was led to the exact number of books by the Holy Spirit. Why would they think we have sixty-six? It isn't because Scripture says anywhere that we were going to receive sixty-six. The Bible tells nowhere how many books there would be. It doesn't even tell us that we would get several books. We knew it was books and that those books were the right books because those were the ones that the churches settled upon.

Agreement upon the words of Scripture is even plainer. Revelation 22:18-19 is commonly referred to in discussions about canonicity and they don't refer to books.

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: 19 And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

You see "words" here, not books. Speaking about canonicity in **his theology**, Wayne Grudem writes (p. 65):

The severity of the punishments in Revelation 22:18-19 that come to those who add or take from God's words also confirms the importance of God's people having a correct canon.

He also references passages with "words" as a basis of canonicity and says:

We know that God loves his people, and it is supremely important that God's people have his words, for they are our life (Deut. 32:47; Matt. 4:4).

If non-preservationists were to be consistent, they would savage this writing by Grudem because he refers to Matthew 4:4 as a text that is speaking about the written Word of God. Of course, he doesn't get that kind of treatment, because canonicity is not such a controversial issue.

There is an attack today on the books of Scripture. Bart Ehrman, well-respected scholar and published author, in his popular *Misquoting Jesus* says that we read and use the books we do because a particular group of Christians were in the majority and they won out over the others, so it was they who decided what the Christian creeds would be. According to him, they established themselves to be right and then determined what future Christians would believe about Jesus. We only read their version of things because they had defeated the other groups. Many, many other books had been written about Jesus and were not much copied or preserved because, in his opinion, they didn't contain the popular teaching. Ehrman also believes that the books that we do have were fiddled with in order to align them even more with the orthodox and politically correct teaching.

So why isn't Ehrman right? We do still have those disputed and rejected books to which he refers. And many of them are very old, even though they are in the minority of manuscripts. Evangelicals reject what Ehrman says based upon what was preserved by the saints. Those are the books and history that we have. We have a bias toward those books which present the consistent and historic view of Jesus Christ. The other books passed by the wayside. We still have them, but just because they were preserved somewhere, doesn't mean that they should come up again for reconsideration. And yet, because we find an old manuscript, like Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, and we have rationalistic laws of textual criticism, we reject the text agreed upon by believers led by the Holy Spirit. This clashes with the evangelical approach to canonicity. The two positions, canonicity and preservation, should be consistent.

Canonicity and Preservation

What I am describing about books is also the historic Christian position about the Words as well. I've often referenced these quotes here and other places, but as an example, Richard Capel, wrote in 1658:

[W]e have the Copies in both languages [Hebrew and Greek], which Copies vary not from Primitive writings in any matter which may stumble any. This

concernes onely the learned, and they know that by consent of all parties, the most learned on all sides among Christians do shake hands in this, that God by his providence hath preserved them uncorrupt. . . . As God committed the Hebrew text of the Old Testament to the Jewes, and did and doth move their hearts to keep it untainted to this day: So I dare lay it on the same God, that he in his providence is so with the Church of the Gentiles, that they have and do preserve the Greek Text uncorrupt, and clear: As for some scrapes by Transcribers, that comes to no more, than to censure a book to be corrupt, because of some scrapes in the printing, and 'tis certain, that what mistake is in one print, is corrected in another.

He was referring to the words of the *textus receptus* of the New Testament. This fit right in with the Westminster Confession (1646) and the London Baptist Confession (1689):

The Old Testament in Hebrew . . . , and the New Testament in Greek . . . , being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical.

The church already settled on the text of Scripture. They believed God perfectly preserved it. Something new couldn't be Scripture, just like a new canon couldn't be the canon. We aren't open to a new canon and we aren't open to new words of Scripture. Opening up criticism and discussion to new words would be akin to opening it up for a new canon. This isn't a historic, orthodox position in either case.

Some have charged those who believe the perfect preservation of Scripture with the name fideist, used in derogatory fashion. Fideism is supposedly a kind of baseless faith position that detaches itself from evidence. They say that since Scripture never promises preservation in a particular text type, we can't really apply verses on preservation to any particular text of the New Testament. Well, since the Bible never promises a sixty-six book canon, we can't really apply verses used for canonicity to the canon of Scripture. I say no to both of them. If I'm a fideist to believe in sixty-six books based upon biblical presuppositions, then I guess I'm a fideist then.

God inspired every Word of Scripture and all of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). Hebrew copyists took this so seriously that they counted every Word so as to never miss one. Every Word was important, not just the doctrines or the message of Scripture. The attacks on preservation of the Bible for centuries and especially today provide the foundation for the postmodern uncertainty in churches and theological circles today.

The devaluation of doctrine, that so many evangelicals talk and **write about**, has come in a major way because of their carelessness about the preservation of God's Words. Even the reformed have left in this their Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura.

R. C. Sproul decries this in a recent publication on **canonicity** by his organization:

Beyond the radical reductionism of Bultmann, we have seen more recently attempts among professing evangelicals, and even within the Reformed community, to seek a different type of reduction of Scripture. We have seen views of so-called “limited inspiration” or “limited inerrancy.” That is to say, the Spirit’s inspiration of the Bible is not holistic, but rather is limited to matters of faith and doctrine. In this scenario, proponents suggest we can distinguish between doctrinal matters that are of divine origin and what the Bible teaches in matters of science and history, and, in some cases, ethics. Therefore, there are portions within the Bible that are not equally inspired by God. In this case, we see the reappearance of a canon within a canon. The problem that arises is a serious one. Perhaps most severe is the question, who is it who decides what part of the Bible really belongs to the canon? Once we remove ourselves from a view of *tota Scriptura*, we are free then to pick and choose what portions of Scripture are normative for Christian faith and life, just like picking cherries from a tree.

To do this we would have to revisit the teaching of Jesus, wherein He said that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. We would have to change it, to have our Lord say that we do not live by bread alone but by only some of the words that come to us from God. In this case, the Bible is reduced to the status where the whole is less than the sum of its parts. This is an issue that the church has to face in every generation, and it has reappeared today in some of the most surprising places. We’re finding, in seminaries that call themselves Reformed, professors advocating this type of canon within the canon. The church must say an emphatic “no” to these departures from orthodox Christianity, and she must reaffirm her faith not only in *sola Scriptura*, but in *tota Scriptura* as well.

Tota Scriptura?

What Sproul describes here is all over the place in evangelicalism. In a recent debate with Frank Turk **at his blog** on the preservation of Scripture, he wrote this:

Because we receive the NT in translation (for example, in the KJV), we must insist that the perfection of Scripture today is found in the *message* and not the *words*.

Later at another **one of his blogs**, he wrote this comment in bold print:

All believers at all times have sufficient special revelation to make a saving confession of faith; in this, their confession of faith is not dependent on any particular text type or even the perfection of any particular manuscript.

Professing fundamentalists also chime in with this view of the Bible. Paul W. Downey in *God's Word in Our Hands* writes (p. 376):

God's Word transcends written documents, even the physical universe, and will be completely and ultimately fulfilled if not one copy remains. The power and effectiveness and duration of the Word of God, and man's responsibility to obey it, do not demand the presence or even the existence of any physical copy.

Speaking of God and the preservation of Scripture, Kevin Bauder writes this (pp. 159-160) in *One Bible Only?*:

He might preserve some words and He might permit some to be lost, depending upon His own purpose.

Unless we define God's Word as the message or the concepts or the doctrines, we don't find tota Scriptura in those statements. This is not the historical position of the church. Men of the past believed that Scripture was preserved in the very Words and they believed that the Words in the copies they possessed were identical with the original manuscripts. Their bibliology applied to both the doctrines of canonicity and of preservation.

It really comes down to believing in the greater providence or greater miracle depending upon how someone defines providence or miracle. The first known historical account of the 27 books of the New Testament comes in 376BC. And yet, we believe that the saints had the books of the New Testament. The same Holy Spirit that led them could also lead them to the words. There really is no reason why He could not. Some might say that we don't have a historical basis to believe that they had all of them, but we do. The saints of the reformation period, who were still talking about canonicity too, agreed on the books and the words. Scripture was settled. It still should be.