

New Testament Survey

The Canon of the New Testament

- I. Revelation, Inspiration, and Illumination¹
 - A. Revelation - the process whereby God reveals Divine truth
 1. God has spoken through angels - Genesis 18, 19, Matthew 28:5-7
 2. God has spoken through a loud voice - Genesis 3:9-19
 3. God has spoken through a still, small voice - 1 Kings 19:11-12
 4. God has spoken through nature - Psalm 19:1
 5. God has spoken through the mouth of an ass - Numbers 22:28
 5. God has spoken through dreams - Genesis 28:12, Matthew 1:20
 6. God has spoken through visions - Genesis 46:2, 1 Chronicles 21:16
 7. God has spoken through Christophanies - Genesis 32:24-30, Exodus 3:2
 - B. Inspiration - the process whereby God revealed the exact words He wanted written down
 1. Various theories of inspiration
 - a. **The Natural Theory** - the writers of the Bible were inspired like Shakespeare.
 - b. **The Mechanical Dictation Theory** - God used the writers of the Bible like secretaries in which he audibly dictated the actual words to be written.
 - c. **The Content (or Concept) Theory** - God inspired only the ideas, not the words.
 - d. **The Partial Theory** - God only inspired certain parts of the Bible.
 - e. **The Spiritual-Rule-Only Theory** - only those parts of the Bible that refer to spiritual matters are inspired, all others are not (e.g. science, history, etc.).
 - f. **The Plenary-Verbal Theory** - God inspired all of the Bible (plenary), and the very words used (verbal).

¹ Harold Willmington, *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), pp. 788-793

2. Biblical texts on inspiration

a. The Method of Inspiration

2 Peter 1:20-21 Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

The process of inspiration is given in 2 Peter 1:20-21. In these two verses we are told that the Holy Spirit moved men to write the Scriptures. The word “moved” has the idea of being borne along by the wind. In some mysterious way God used the personal experiences, style, and background of the author in the process of writing the Scripture in the sense that a ship is moved along by the wind. Even though we can see the stylistic differences of each of the authors of the Bible, the words are nevertheless those that God desired be penned. The Bible was not written by the will of man, but by the will of God.

For example, Paul did not sit down one day and decide, in an of himself, to pen a book of the Bible called 2 Timothy. In fact, as he wrote this personal letter to his young protege, he was most likely not even conscious of the moving of the Spirit. As far as Paul was concerned, he was writing a personal letter to a friend. However, behind the scenes the Holy Spirit was at work so that as Paul wrote this letter, it was the very words that God wanted used. Paul thought it was just a letter, God knew that it would become part of the New Testament.

b. The Process and Result of Inspiration

2 Timothy 3:16-17 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

1). The Process

We are told in verse 16 that all Scripture is god-breathed. The word used, *theopneustos*, refers to the act of God exhaling. It is not “breathed in” but “breathed out.” The Scriptures can be thought of as the very breath of God. They do not *contain* the words of God, they *are* the words of God.

2). The Results

a). Doctrine

Doctrine tells us what is true and what is not. It is didactic and antithetical in nature. It is didactic in the sense that it gives the what to believe. It is antithetical in that it gives the only truth. We cannot know what is really true apart from the revelation of God and Scripture. We cannot know what to believe unless we are exposed to the doctrine that the Scripture gives us.

b). Reproof

Reproof refers to the exposure of that which is wrong. Not only does the Bible tell us what to believe, but it tells us when we are not doing what we should. Without the divine revelation of God, we would not know what is sin and what is not.

c). Correction

Doctrine tells us what to do, reproof tells us when we are wrong, and correction tells us how to get back and do what is right. It would be awful if the Bible only told us what was wrong but never told us how to correct things. The Bible never leaves us beaten and battered with no hope of anything better. Where it brings chastisement, it also brings healing.

d). Instruction

Instruction tells us how to stay on the right path. A good way to see how all four of these attributes work together is as follows:

Doctrine tells us what path to take,
 Reproof tells us when we are off of the path,
 Correction tells us how to get back on the path,
 Instruction tells us how to stay on the path.

3. Implications of inspiration

- a. Plenary-Verbal inspiration does not mean all parts of the Bible are equally important to us, but only that all are equally inspired.
- b. Plenary-Verbal Inspiration does not guarantee the inspiration of any modern version or ancient translation of the Scriptures.
- c. Plenary-Verbal inspiration does not allow for any false teaching, but it does record the lies of others, e.g. Satan to Eve.
- d. Plenary-Verbal inspiration does not permit any historical, scientific, or prophetic error.
- e. Plenary-Verbal inspiration does not prohibit personal research.

Example, Luke researched the historical data for the books of Luke and Acts.

- f. Plenary-Verbal inspiration does not deny the use of extrabiblical sources, e.g. Paul in Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12.

Examples are Paul quoting a secular author in Acts 17:28, and Jude quoting from the Book of Enoch in Jude.

- g. Plenary-Verbal inspiration does not overwhelm the personality of the human author. Paul sounds like Paul and John like John. Each writer of the Bible has their own stylistic differences that are readily apparent to both English and original language readers of the Bible.

- h. Plenary-Verbal inspiration does not exclude the usage of pictorial or symbolic language. Scripture should be interpreted recognizing the various figures of speech.
 - i. Plenary-Verbal inspiration does not mean uniformity in all details of events described in the Bible, e.g. the inscription above the cross.
 - j. Plenary-Verbal inspiration assures us that God has accurately transmitted all that he wishes us to know.
4. Inspiration is the most important aspect of Biblical revelation.
 - a. One may have inspiration without revelation.
 - b. One may have inspiration without illumination - 1 Peter 1:11.
 5. Completion of inspiration

God is not in the process of inspiring additions to the Bible. With the closure of the Book of Revelation, God has ceased in his written revelation to man. The process God is involved in today is illumination, the process of taking the written revelation and revealing its meaning and application to lives today.

C. Illumination

1. The Reasons for Illumination

- a. It is necessary because of natural blindness - 1 Corinthians 2:14

1 Corinthians 2:14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

- b. It is necessary because of satanic blindness - 2 Corinthians 4:3-4.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

- c. It is necessary because of carnal blindness - 1 Corinthians 3, Hebrews 5:12-14

Hebrews 5:12-14 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

2. The Results of Illumination

- a. Sinners are saved - Psalm 146:8, 119:130
- b. Christians are strengthened - 1 Peter 2:2, Psalm 119:105

3. Implications of Illumination
 - a. Some amount of sincerity is required before God illuminates men - John 4:24, Hebrews 11:6.
 - b. The Holy Spirit seeks the aid of others to illuminate certain men, e.g. Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

II. The Canon of the New Testament

A. The Rules of Canonization²

1. Apostolic Authorship
 - a. Was this book written by an Apostle?
 - b. Was this book written by one who was closely associated with an Apostle?
2. Church Testimony and Use
 - a. Was this book recognized by the early Church as inspired?
 - b. Was this book commonly used in the early Church as a foundation for doctrine and faith.
3. Doctrinal Reliability
 - a. Does this book agree with the rest of the Bible in matters of doctrine?
 - b. Does this book claim inspiration?
 - c. Does this book specifically disclaim inspiration?
4. Spiritual Power
 - a. Does this book possess a certain "power" as evidenced by the changed lives and spiritual growth of those who read it?

B. Some Early Witnesses to the Canon of the New Testament

1. Clement of Alexandria - A.D. 150-215

Accepted all of the New Testament. Quoted from all of the New Testament except James, 2 Peter and 3 John.

2. Tertullian of Carthage - A.D. 150-220

Accepted all of the current 27 books of the New Testament with the exception of Hebrews which he considered to be written by Barnabas.

3. Irenaeus of Lyons - A.D. 130-202

Quoted from most of the New Testament with the exception of some of the General Epistles.

² James Borland, *A General Introduction to the New Testament*, (Lynchburg: University Book House, 1986), pp. 134-137.

4. Polycarp - A.D. 69-155

Quoted and accepted most of the current New Testament as we have it today.

C. The Early Councils on the Canon of the New Testament³

1. Council of Nicaea - A.D. 325

Although there was no definition of the canon of the New Testament from this council, Athanasius and Arius quoted extensively from the New Testament in their arguments regarding the deity of Christ.

2. Third Council of Carthage - A.D. 397

Lists all 27 of the current books of the New Testament as canonical. Curiously, it ascribes the authorship of Hebrews to Paul, possibly to smooth its acceptance as canon.

3. Council of Hippo - A.D. 419

Lists the current 27 books as canonical.

D. The Antilegomena⁴

Twenty of the New Testament books were accepted without question by the early church. These were called the *homologomena*. The other seven books were questioned by various individuals and councils, and were hence called the *antilegomena*.

³ Henry C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 25-27.

⁴ Borland, pp. 137-139.

1. Hebrews

Was not accepted by all since the writer is unknown. Many think that the only way it was eventually accepted was to ascribe the authorship to Paul.

2. James

- a. Uncertain authorship.
- b. Seeming contradiction of faith and works with that of Paul.
- c. Addressed to the twelve tribes as opposed to the Church.

3. 2 Peter

The style and vocabulary is markedly different than 1 Peter leading some to consider it a forgery.

4. 2 John and 3 John

- a. Often omitted from canonical lists since many times they were considered part of 1 John.
- b. Uncertain authorship.

5. Jude

- a. Uncertain authorship
- b. References the pseudipigraphal work of Enoch.

6. Revelation

- a. Highly figurative language and imagery.
- b. Differs significantly from John's other books.

E. Some Factors which Hastened Canonization⁵

1. A backlash against heretical movements, such as Marcionism, which denied the inspiration and authority of some of the New Testament books.
2. The need to define the accepted collection of inspired books, especially as other good books like Clement, Barnabas, and the Didache were copied along with the rest of the New Testament books.
3. As a response to persecution. The early church had to decide what books were worth dying for and what books were worth preserving.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 139-140.