

Canon of Scripture

Lesson 13

I. Criteria of Canonicity

- a. The earliest Christians did not trouble themselves about criteria of canonicity; they would not have readily **understood** that expression. They accepted the Old Testament scriptures as they had received them without debate or question.
- b. As far as they were concerned the authority of those Old Testament scriptures was sufficiently **ratified** by the teaching and example of the Lord and his apostles.
- c. None-the-less, some kind of standard, was not only desirable but **necessary** quite early. When prophets, for example, claimed to speak in the Lord's name, it became necessary to 'discern the spirits' by which they spoke. *1 John 4:1 Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. KJV*
- d. Later as the question of canon came into play, the **tests** given to the biblical books to determine canonicity were stringently applied; especially books of the New Testament. These tests included:
 1. **Authorship**-who wrote the book or the Epistle?
 2. Local church **acceptance**-had it been read by the various churches? What was their opinion?
 3. Church father's **recognition**-did the pupils of the disciples quoted from the book? As an example, Polycarp was a disciple of John the apostle. Therefore one test of the book might be, "what did Polycarp think of it?"
 4. Book subject matter or **content**-What did the book teach? Did it contradict other recognized books?
 5. Personal **edification**-did the book have the ability to inspire, convict, and edify local congregations and individual believers?

II. God's Three Tools

- a. In order to transmit God's thoughts through the medium of writers and into the spirits of the intended hearers, God made use of **three** specific tools.
- b. **Revelation**: When God speaks to man and that man hears that which God wants written.
- c. **Inspiration**: From man to parchment; when man writes that which God wants written.
- d. **Illumination**: from paper to heart; man receives the light of that which God has written.

III. Inspiration

- a. For many centuries inspiration and canonicity have been closely bound up **together** in Christian thinking: books were included in the canon, because they were inspired; a book is known to be inspired because it is in the canon.
- b. **Inspiration** in this sense referred to the operation of the Holy Spirit by which the prophets of Israel were enabled to utter the word of God. The vocabulary was theirs; the message was his.
- c. The rabbis assigned the title "**prophets**" to the authors for the historical books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) as well as for the Pentateuch and the Psalms.
- d. When the New Testament writings were later included with the Old Testament as part of 'all scripture', it was natural to conclude that they **too** were 'inspired by God'.
- e. According to the later books of the New Testament, the **whole** of Hebrew scripture (whether the original text or the Greek version) 'is inspired by God' *2 Tim 3:16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: KJV*
- f. As New Testament writings emerged, Christians discerned the Holy Spirit was at work in the New Testament scriptures, although only **one** book of the New Testament explicitly claims prophetic inspiration. *Rev 1:1-3 he revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw — that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. NIV*
- g. The Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of prophecy; he is also the witnessing and **interpreting** Spirit. In the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that the Spirit would be the disciples' teacher and bring his own words to their remembrance. *John 14:26 But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. KJV*
- h. The scriptures have been, and continue to be, one of the chief instruments which the Spirit uses in the **transformation** work in the lives of believers.
- i. The work of the Holy Spirit is discerned by means of His **inner** witness which gives the assurance to hearers or readers of scripture that in its words God himself is addressing them. *1 Cor 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. KJV*
- j. The inbreathing of the Holy Spirit into the reader is as essential for the **right** understanding of the Scriptures as it was in the original writers for their production of them.'
- k. His 'inbreathing' into the authors is called inspiration and his 'inbreathing' into the hearers is called **illumination**.

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IV. Theories of Inspiration

- a. Over the centuries not all scholars have agreed on what was involved in transferring the voice of God into the vocabulary of man. As a result, scholars have developed at least **six** different theories to explain the meaning of inspiration.
- b. The **natural** theory. This says Bible writers were inspired in the same sense that William Shakespeare was inspired. In other words, that spark of divine inspiration that supposedly lies within all men simply burned a little brighter in the hearts of the Bible writers.
- c. This theory is totally **rejected** by the apostle Peter. 2 Peter 1:20 "*knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation*"
- d. The **mechanical** theory. This theory suggests that God coldly and rigidly dictated the Bible to his writers as an office manager would dictate to his secretary. God is a personal God and is anything but mechanical.
- e. The Holy Spirit therefore never transgressed the limits of the writer's vocabulary or **overwhelmed** his personality. The self-consciousness of each writer was never suspended nor was his intellectual power superseded. Holy men spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.
- f. The content or **concept** theory. This theory says that only the main plot of the paragraph or chapter is inspired. This theory is immediately refuted by many biblical passages. *Matt 5:18 for verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled*
- g. The **partial** theory. The idea of this theory is that only certain parts of the Bible are inspired.
- h. This is the position of liberal theologians who would cheerfully accept those portions of the Bible which deal with love and brotherhood, but quickly reject the passages dealing with sin, righteousness, and future judgment. Paul refutes the partial theory in 2 Timothy 3:16: "**All Scripture**".
- i. The spiritual rule **only** theory. This is the Bible may be regarded as our infallible rule of faith and practice in all matters of religious, ethical, and spiritual value, but not in other matters such as historical and scientific statements.
- j. The fallacy of the spiritual rule only theory is that any book or man whose scientific or historical statements are open to question can certainly not be trusted in matters of moral and spiritual pronouncements. This theory is soundly refuted by **Jesus** himself. *John 3:12 if I have told you earthly things, and ye believed not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?*
- k. The **plenary**-verbal theory. This theory states that all (plenary) the very words (verbal) of the Bible are inspired by God. This view alone is the correct one. *Matt 4:4 but he answered and said, it is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeded out of the mouth of God*

V. Implications of Inspiration

- a. Plenary verbal inspiration does not teach that all parts of the Bible are equally **important**, but only that they are equally inspired.
- b. Plenary verbal inspiration does not guarantee the inspiration of any modern or ancient translation of the Bible, but deals **only** with the original Hebrew and Greek languages.
- c. Plenary verbal inspiration does not allow for any **false** teaching, but it does on occasion record the lie of someone. As one reads the Bible, he must carefully distinguish between what God records and what he sanctions.
- d. Plenary verbal inspiration does not permit any historical, scientific or prophetic **error** whatsoever. While the Bible is not a textbook on science, it is nevertheless held that every scientific statement in the Scripture is absolutely true.
- e. Plenary verbal inspiration does not prohibit personal **research**. The student of Scripture is invited to research language, geography, history, custom, and the commentaries of men in an effort to fully understand and to apply the Scripture being studied.
- f. Plenary verbal inspiration does not exclude the usage of pictorial and **symbolic** language. This is to say the Holy Spirit does not demand we accept every word of the Bible in a literal and legalistic way. Differences of perspective and linguistic form must always be understood.
- g. Plenary verbal inspiration assures us that God included all the **necessary** things He wanted us to know, and excluded everything else.

VI. Application

- a. What problems arise when the believer fails to grasp the significance of plenary verbal inspiration and why that theory alone adequately explains what we mean by inspiration?
- b. If we accept the theory of plenary verbal inspiration how should we handle instances in the text of modern Bibles that scholars tell us were not in the original manuscripts?