

More about "Canonization"

Below are three brief articles, written at different times. All emphasize the need to "recognize" the Word of God for what it is, but each focuses on a somewhat different issue related to that concept.

THE BASIC ISSUE: Who decides which books are part of the Bible?

It is *God* who decides! Our job is to simply *recognize* what God has done.

The books of the Bible did not become part of "God's Word" because of the decisions of *people*. They were *already* God's Word. Religious institutions may choose to "vote" books into the Bible (and some have done so), but their actions have no meaning; they cannot cause those books to actually become God's Word. It is the duty of humans to simply *recognize* the books of the Bible as coming from God.

People who *know* God (those who follow Jesus, according to his definition of "following") will tend to recognize God's Word for what it is. People who do *not* know God (the unsaved and the mere "church-goers") will either tend to *not* recognize the books as being from God, or (if they acknowledge them), they won't base their lives on what those books say. But regardless of the response of people, God's Word continues to be God's Word. The books of the Bible continue to be "God-breathed," *whether or not people recognize that fact...* and any other books continue to *not* be from God, *even if people claim they are*.

"Recognizing God's Word" and a Clarification of What it Means

The word "recognize" needs strongly emphasized, as well as the fact that people don't *cause* the books of the Bible to become God's Word. Any other view would be backwards! Jesus told us that his "sheep" would *hear* his voice. People don't cause the voice to become his! Rather, we hear his voice because we *are* his sheep, not because we (or some supposed authority) "voted" that it was his voice.

Two things need clarified about the statement that God's people will recognize God's authorship of the Biblical writings:

CLARIFICATION # 1

First, the fact that a person *claims* to follow God does not mean that he *does* follow God. Nor does it mean that he will accept the writings of the apostles and prophets as being from God. We can illustrate this even in Scripture, by the very people the prophets wrote to. More often than not, they were people who had abandoned the true God and gone after fakes, *but they still claimed they were genuine*. They would often not only *reject* God's message (the Word of God), but would reject (and sometimes even kill) the prophet. Those who accepted the prophet's writings were in the minority, even though, in the long run, they would be proven to be the true followers of God.

CLARIFICATION # 2

Second, this does not mean that every *genuine* follower of God would accept *every* book in the Bible as being from God. Down through history, various people have had disagreements about certain books - often for superficial reasons, such as, "the book is too small" or "it isn't widely distributed." Sometimes they were so impressed by a "man-made" book, that they began to think it was from God, even though it wasn't. All this would have been due to the individual preferences, cultural influences and other factors that would have formed the person's "context."

On the other hand, in contrast to the varying perspectives that individuals sometimes had, we can look at the trends over the immediate centuries after the books were written, and observe that the same collection of books tended to be recognized over and over. This is because the real "God-breathed" books *transcend* time and culture; and God's people tend to gravitate toward them.

Today we have the advantage of being able to observe these things - events that happened *outside* our own personal context. We do not have to "struggle" over such issues anymore; but can confidently rest in the fact that we have God's Word in our possession. Now all we need to do is pay attention to it and let it change the way we think and live!

Why Did Some of the Early "Church Fathers" Have Different Opinions about What Books Were "God's Word"?

Why did some of the early "church fathers" come up with lists that differ from what we have today?

In *any* specific age, cultural and personal factors may influence an individual's or group's perceptions about what is (or isn't) one of God's writings. Books with human authorship may look good to some people, given the right circumstances, and some of the ones that came from God may look questionable. Because of this, if we relied on the decisions of people at one specific point in time (whether individually or collectively), we could easily reach wrong conclusions about some of the books. This is illustrated by the various recommended lists that some of the early "church fathers" wrote - lists which tended to contain *most* of the books now recognized as God's Word, but which sometimes omitted a few or included an occasional book that was of human origin.

On the other hand, when we look across the span of time, God's people will continue to gravitate back toward the same group of books - books which they *recognize* as being from God. Down through the centuries - transcending cultural and personal factors - certain writings will continue to be recognized as having come from God - and these are now called the "books of the Bible."

There have been many good books down through history. Some are popular at one moment, but are later forgotten. Others may even be called "inspired," and may remain popular for a long time. But in the end, only the *genuine* Word of God will endure. The rest - even the very best - will become as forgotten as the people - the mere "dust" (Ps. 103:14) - who wrote them.