

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

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The Canonicity of 2 Peter

(Jerry Fite)

Does 2 Peter belong in the New Testament? Some brethren are saying the evidence leans in favor of 2 Peter being a genuine book of the inspired New Testament, but they cannot be dogmatic about it. What evidence are these different “leaners” looking at? Why do we have the 27 books in our New Testament, and not others such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*?

The answers to these questions involve an understanding of the Canon. The word “canon” comes from the Greek word “kanan,” literally meaning “straight staff,” hence a “measuring rod,” denoting “rule.” When we speak of the canonicity of books, we are looking at books that meet a standard whereby they are recognized as authoritative.

The historical record is clear. By the latter fourth century, the 27 books we have in our New Testament, including 2 Peter, were considered the authoritative books to live by and by which to conduct the affairs of the church. The councils of Laodicea (A.D. 366), Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397) all declared these 27 books as “canonical.” It was not until Philoxenus (A.D. 508) presented a new version of the Syriac Bible that these same

27 books were recognized as part of the canon of the New Testament in the East as they were in the West.

Early in the second century, a recognized list of authoritative books was needed. The need arose to establish what books should be read in church services, even though some that could be read might not be authoritative in settling doctrinal questions. Also, the church needed to know what books could be turned over in times of persecution to imperial police without committing sacrilege.

Other lists also appeared in the second century. Marcion, in A.D.140, produced a list which emphasized his antisemitism. For example, he listed Luke, the least Jewish of the Gospels as authoritative, along with ten of Paul’s epistles, omitting three.

At the end of the second century, a second list appeared. It is called today the “*Muratorian fragment*” because it was published in 1740 by Cardinal Muratori. The list recognized many of the books of our New Testament as authoritative. “*The Shepherd of Hermas*” is mentioned as worthy to be read, but not recognized

as among the authoritative prophetic or apostolic writings inspired by God.

During the third century, there was dispute over 2 Peter. Origen (A.D. 185-254) states that 2 Peter along with Hebrews, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude, were “disputed by some.” Eusebius (A.D. 265-340) acknowledged all the books of our New Testament as authoritative except James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John, which he says were disputed by some, but accepted “by the majority.”

By the time of the councils of the fourth century, the participants merely recognized what had become generally accepted. Most of our New Testament was already accepted, being recognized as authoritative, as they were written in the first century. 2 Peter was now accepted along with Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 and 3 John and Revelation. If one cannot be dogmatic about 2 Peter, due to disputes, one cannot be dogmatic about these other books as well, or 25% of our New Testament. While there were disputes by some, the majority had already accepted the books. The councils merely “codified” what was already acknowledged as authoritative.