

## The Canon – Belgic Confession Article 4 - 6

Article 4 of the Belgic Confession uses the word ‘canonical’.

*“We believe that the Holy Scriptures consist of two parts, namely, the Old and the New Testament, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged.”*

The Belgic Confession lists the 66 books of the Bible as they have been received by the Church.

These books have divine authority. Nothing can be brought in against them. No human wisdom, no science. This comes from God and this is what we must believe. All 66 books.

In Revelation 22:18-19 our Lord makes clear what the consequences are if we take away from them or add to them.

In Galatians 1:6-9, the apostle Paul tells us that those who bring a different gospel than is preached (and is found in the 66 books) is accursed.

### The history of the Canon

How the church came to accept the Canon:

#### **The Old Testament:**

The Lord Jesus also often quoted from the Old Testament, which was called ‘The Law and the Prophets’ (Matthew 5:17) as did the apostles.

In those days, the books of the Old Testament were commonly accepted as the Word of God.

The Old Testament was translated in Greek and was known and available to the apostles: the Septuagint, which contains all the books of the Old Testament.

#### **The New Testament:**

The Lord Jesus came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17).

#### **Matthew 5:17:**

17 “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

#### **Acts 17:11:**

11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

#### **Revelation 22:18-19:**

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

#### **Galatians 1:6-9:**

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, 7 which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

The New Testament shows us the fulfillment of the Old Testament in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The New Testament does not bring us a new gospel, but we can check in the Old Testament, that what the New Testament says is indeed the fulfillment of the Old Testament (see also Acts 17:11).

It shows very clearly how the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ. And now, nobody may add something new to it or take away from it (see Revelation 22:18-19).

Galatians 1:6-9: Anybody who preaches a gospel that is not in accordance with what God revealed before, is a false preacher and deserves God's eternal wrath.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church accepted these 66 books as the only true Word of God.

**A little bit of history:**

Peter recognized Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16). Some of the books of the New Testament were being circulated among the churches (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). Clement of Rome mentioned eight New Testament books (A.D. 95). Ignatius of Antioch seven books (A.D. 115). Polycarp, a disciple of John the apostle, acknowledged 15 books (A.D. 108), Irenaeus 21 books (A.D. 185), Hippolytus 22 books (A.D. 170-235).

The first "canon" was compiled in A.D. 170 and included all of the New Testament books except Hebrews, James, and 3 John. In A.D. 363, the Council of Laodicea stated that only the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament were to be read in the churches. The Council of Hippo (A.D. 393) and the Council of Carthage (A.D. 397) also affirmed the same 27 NT books as authoritative.

In determining what belongs to the Bible and what not, the following criteria were often used:

- 1) Was the author an apostle or closely connected with an apostle?
- 2) Is the book being accepted by the body of Christ at large?
- 3) Are the contents of the book consistent in doctrine and orthodox teaching?
- 4) Did the book bear evidence of high moral and spiritual values, which would reflect a work of the Holy Spirit?

The church did not determine the canon, but only accepted these books as coming from God. The human process of collecting the books of the Bible was flawed, but God, in His sovereignty, brought the early church to the recognition of the books He had inspired.

Canon = rule.

Article 5 of the Belgic Confession:

***The Authority of Holy Scripture***

*We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith. We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence of this in themselves; for even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.*

A canon is something that has authority. The Scripture is the Canon for us. It has divine and absolute authority. It is for all times and for everybody the same. God did not speak differently to those in the past. God never changes. His Word and His will regarding our salvation never change either.

### Difference between Canonical and Apocryphal books

Article 6 of the Belgic Confession:

#### ***The Difference Between the Canonical and Apocryphal Books***

*We distinguish these holy books from the apocryphal, namely, 3 and 4 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, additions to Esther, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men in the Furnace, Susannah, Bel and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. The church may read and take instruction from these so far as they agree with the canonical books. They are, however, far from having such power and authority that we may confirm from their testimony any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less may they be used to detract from the authority of the holy books.*

The 66 books are received by the Church, through the Holy Spirit as holy and canonical. That is not only because of how it went in history. It is also because these books clearly show that they are all part of the gospel of salvation. They all have their place in the history of salvation: God goes His way of salvation from Genesis (Creation, Fall in sin) to the coming of Christ (Salvation) and to His return and the new creation

Apocryphal books have a different character and clearly do not fit in the Bible as part of the history of salvation.

- \* The Bible/the Canon: About God's praise and our salvation
- \* apocryphal books: About the praise of human beings, or Israel as a nation.

#### **In which order?**

The 66 books are listed in article 4 in the order as we are used to.

In the Old Testament, we find the books from Genesis to Esther mainly in historical order, then followed by poetic books and wisdom books. At the end we find the prophets.

The Hebrew Bible has a different order in the Old Testament. The Bible (Old Testament) is often referred to by the Jews as: 'The Law and the Prophets'. This name is often used by our Lord in the gospels when He refers to the Old Testament as well. Sometimes the Jews called it 'The Law, the Prophets and Writing', the 'Tanach' or 'Tanakh'.

Tanakh is an acronym for Torah (The Teachings, the five books of Moses), **N**evi'im (Prophets) and **K**etuvim (Writings). Remember, the Hebrew written language originally did not make use of vowels, so the acronym was TNK. When pronounced the vowels were added and it became T(a)N(a)K(h): Tanakh.