

# Canonical Books of the Holy Scripture

*Text: Belgic Confession 4; II Timothy 3:10-4:5;*

The word “canonical” comes from a Greek term meaning a straight rod or rule. The *canon* of Scripture is our authoritative *standard*: the 66 inspired books of the Old and New Testaments. These alone are the rule for faith, doctrine, and life. The *Belgic Confession*, in article 4, affirms that these books are canonical, “against which nothing can be alleged.”

Throughout church history, various figures have attacked the canon. In the second century, Marcion (85-160 AD), who could be called the first Bible critic, rejected all 39 Old Testament books and kept only 11 of the New Testament, excluding the pastoral epistles and retaining only the gospel of Luke and 10 Pauline epistles. In the Reformation, Calvin contended with Castellio, who dismissed the Song of Solomon as an erotic poem, not inspired Scripture. Luther questioned James, calling it a “right strawy epistle” because he believed it didn’t teach justification by faith alone (yet James teaches the life *flowing from* justification, not the *means* to it). Thankfully, the Lutheran churches did not follow Luther’s opinion here.

## The Canon Listed and Explained

*Belgic Confession* article 4 lists all 66 books. One book, Lamentations, is not named separately but was considered part of Jeremiah’s writings. Another unusual note is that I and II Chronicles are labeled “Paralipomenon,” a Greek word meaning “things left out.” This comes from the Septuagint, which understood I and II Chronicles as a supplement to the books of Samuel and Kings, focusing especially on Judah. It omits the northern kingdom and includes genealogies and temple worship.

Curiously, the confession mentions “the first book of Ezra” but no second. This is due to the confusion in historical naming: Ezra and Nehemiah were once viewed as I and II Esdras. Guido de Brès wasn’t sure whether to label them as such or separately, so both are listed. The Psalms are called “the Psalms of David,” though David did not write all 150—Moses, Solomon and Asaph, among others, contributed; David, however, wrote the majority.

The confession speaks of “the four great prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) and “the twelve lesser prophets.” This is not about their authority or inspiration but simply length.

The third paragraph names the New Testament books and attributes Hebrews to Paul. The confession says: “the fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul, namely... Romans... and one to the Hebrews.” This attribution has been debated. Arthur Pink, Albert Barnes and John Owen held that Paul wrote Hebrews. Owen even devoted a lengthy discussion to this. However, Luther believed it was written by Apollos, and Calvin rejected Pauline authorship (though he approved the rest of the *Belgic Confession*, saying in a letter: “We would wish that the letter to the Hebrews was not attributed to Paul, for we are convinced by strong arguments that the author is someone else”).

Is it necessary to believe that Paul wrote Hebrews to join a Reformed church? No. The membership vow asks: “Do you believe the *doctrine* taught in the articles of the Christian religion?” Authorship is not doctrine. If someone denied Pauline authorship of *Romans*, that would be problematic, since “Paul” appears in the inspired text (Rom. 1:1). Hebrews lacks such a statement, however, making the author unknown. Origen said, “Only God knows who wrote Hebrews.” The question is not *who wrote it* but *whether it is inspired*. Since Hebrews testifies to Christ, urges faith in Him and is included by providence in the canon, it stands on equal footing with all other Scripture.

## **Learning and Remembering the Canon**

Knowing the 66 books in order is valuable for our Christian life and helps in personal Bible reading, family devotions, public worship and witnessing.

The Old Testament breaks down into five categories: *Law* (Pentateuch): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; *History*: Joshua through Esther (12 books); *Poetry/Wisdom*: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon; *Major Prophets*: Isaiah through Daniel; *Minor Prophets*: Hosea through Malachi.

Genesis is the book of beginnings: creation, the fall, the flood, and the covenant. Exodus recounts the departure from Egypt. Leviticus deals with priesthood and sacrifices. Numbers records two censuses. Deuteronomy is Moses’ final speech. Joshua leads Israel into Canaan. Judges recounts the cycle of rebellion and deliverance. Ruth, set in the time of the Judges (Ruth 1:1), is a story of redemption. I and II Samuel cover Israel’s transition to monarchy. I and II Kings record the decline and fall of both kingdoms. I and II Chronicles focus on Judah

and temple worship. Ezra and Nehemiah tell of post-exilic restoration. Esther, set in Persia, shows God's providence, despite no mention of His name.

The wisdom books follow roughly chronological order: Job, the earliest, possibly lived in patriarchal times. Psalms, mainly by David, are songs of worship and lament. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon are associated with Solomon, arranged by descending length.

The Major Prophets begin with Isaiah, followed by Jeremiah, Lamentations (Jeremiah's grief), Ezekiel and Daniel. The Minor Prophets (twelve short books) include pre- and post-exilic voices. Hosea and Amos address the north; Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are post-exilic.

The New Testament begins with the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, covering Christ's birth, ministry, death and resurrection. Acts follows, narrating the early church and the apostles' preaching.

Then come Paul's epistles: nine to churches (Romans to II Thessalonians) and four to individuals (I and II Timothy, Titus, Philemon). The pastoral epistles (Timothy and Titus) are guidance to evangelists. Hebrews follows, whose authorship is uncertain. The general epistles include James, Peter's two letters, John's three epistles and Jude. Revelation closes the canon, revealing the triumph of Christ.

There have been light-hearted suggestions to reorder some books. One such idea is to move Jude next to II Peter, given their similar content, and to place John's letters directly before Revelation to keep all Johannine writings together. Though interesting, these ideas are unlikely to change the centuries-old arrangement. The Jewish *Tanakh* contains the same books but arranges and counts them differently – typically as 22 – by combining books such as the twelve minor prophets into one. Article 4 of the *Belgic Confession* declares these books to be canonical and inspired.

## **Treasuring and Using the Canon**

What then are we to do with the canon?

First, read it. Jesus said, "Search the scriptures" (John 5:39). Paul tells Timothy, "From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures..." (II Tim. 3:15). All Scripture is "given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (v. 16). Reading should be prayerful: "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of

thy law" (Ps. 119:18). A Bible reading plan can aid in reading the entire Bible. Even a simple knowledge of book order helps find texts during worship or witness. Consider the example of devout Muslims, many of whom commit all 114 surahs of the Qur'an to memory. If such dedication is shown toward a false scripture, how much more ought we, as Christians, to know and love the 66 inspired books of God's Word?

Second, preach it. "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (II Tim. 4:2). The whole counsel of God must be declared (Acts 20:27). Preaching must span genres: law, psalms, prophets, gospels, epistles, and Revelation. Martin Luther noted that the Bible is not only a book to be read, like other books, but one that is meant to be preached.

Unfortunately, many churches focus only on select books or the gospels, neglecting the Old Testament. Some do this out of ignorance, or due to dispensational views that marginalise most of the Bible. The result is spiritual malnourishment. Proper preaching draws from all 66 books and serves four purposes: "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:16-17).

Paul warns that many "will not endure sound doctrine" and will "turn away their ears from the truth" (II Tim. 4:3-4). Hence the need for bold, faithful preaching.

In addition to reading and preaching, we must also share the Word. Paul praised the Thessalonians: "From you sounded out the word of the Lord..." (I Thess. 1:8). Every believer has a calling to proclaim the Word.

Let us treasure the 66 canonical books. Read them, believe them, obey them, preach them and send them forth into all the world.