

## THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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“Why,” the Sunday-school student asked, “did God not provide for us a Bible with an inspired table of contents, so we would not remain in a quandary as to the precise scope of Scripture?”

“There are three main answers to your question,” replied the teacher. Here is how the teacher summarized them.

First, when you raise a question beginning with “Why” or “How” you must learn the important lesson that it is not possible in every case to receive an answer so complete that it settles all difficulties. This is so because the reasons for God’s action or the methods that he used are often inscrutable from our finite, earthly, sin-blemished viewpoint. Even human parents are not obligated to give a full explanation when their children ask “Why.” How much more is this the case when the infinite, holy and sovereign God confronts our “Why”!

Secondly, the books of the Bible were not produced in a bound volume as we have them now. They were written originally on separate scrolls over a span of some 1500 years. Unless God should provide prophetically a list that included many books not yet in existence, it would appear that the list could not be given before the end of the first century AD—and by that time it was obvious that God’s people did not have an absolute need for such a list. In fact our Lord and the apostles probably did not have one and yet functioned with a clear knowledge of the canon of the OT.

Thirdly, we are not really in a quandary concerning the scope of Scripture, for God has provided his people with grounds for assurance in this area. The study of the canonicity of Scripture is oriented in this direction. It may be pursued along two paths.

In the first place, the history of the canon explores the course of acceptance and rejection among God’s people historically. It takes note of the hesitations, the consensus and the occasional errors of Jews and Christians. This is an arresting study in which we are often confronted with evidences of the providential guidance of God. This study manifests that a notable consensus on the OT existed among the Jews in or before the first century of our era and that a similar consensus on the NT prevailed among Christians no later than AD 400. The present article does not deal with this aspect of canonicity.

In the second place, the dogmatic study of canonicity explores on what ground we may attain a conviction that the 39 books of the OT and the 27

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books of the NT constitute the full collection of the inspired authoritative books that God intended for his people and that this collection is pure (the canon does not include any intruding book that should not be included) and complete (no book that should be there has been omitted). We must therefore study the criteria of canonicity and evaluate their adequacy singly or in combination to give us assurance.

Since the authority of the Hebrew canon was clearly established by the practice of Jesus and the apostles, we will consider here only the canonicity of the NT and review seven criteria that have been at times invoked in the evangelical Church.

#### I. APOSTOLICITY

This criterion points to the obvious fact that the apostles were appointed by Jesus to carry on and perpetuate his teaching ministry under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19–20; John 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:13; 17:25–26). They functioned with this conviction as a premise (Acts 15:28; 1 Cor 2:4–5, 12–13; Gal 1:8, 15; Eph 2:20; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Pet 3:16; Rev 22:18–19; etc.). Applied to the subject of canonicity, the principle could be stated as follows: For a NT book to be canonical it is necessary and sufficient that it should have been written by an apostle. Canonicity would be implied in apostolic authorship. In evaluation we may make the following observations.

1. *Positively.* A number of NT books were indeed written by apostles: Matthew, John (gospel, epistles, Revelation), 13 epistles of Paul, 2 epistles of Peter: 21 out of 27 books, if the traditional view of their authorship be accepted. The possibility exists that James, Jude and Hebrews could be added depending on their authorship, which could be apostolic.

If under apostolic authorship we include books written not by apostles themselves but by people who wrote under their guidance and supervision, all the NT books could be included, for the gospel of Mark was deemed to have been written under the influence of Peter; the gospel of Luke, Acts and Hebrews under the tutelage of Paul; and James and Jude under less clearly defined guidance, if not by the apostles of that name.

This criterion points to the well-accepted factor that canonical NT books were produced during the first century AD and that later works are not to be viewed as candidates.

This is a criterion of fundamental, though not exclusive, significance in the evaluation and discussions in the early Church and of many modern evangelical scholars, such as A. Alexander, C. Hodge and B. B. Warfield.

This criterion is not always construed as the exclusive test, but it may be and was in fact combined with other criteria in the history of the Church.

2. *Negatively.* The canonicity of a book would stand or fall with an acceptance of the authenticity of authorship, according to evangelical persuasion. Now it is a plain matter of record that this authenticity has been challenged and rejected by many Biblical critics. It would seem unfortunate to favor a position where we would have to prove a book's apostolic author-

ship on independent evidence before we could feel confident of its legitimate place in the canon. Evangelicals, even though their confidence may not be shaken by the critical arguments, nevertheless often proceed here with the reverse reasoning: "Since this book is in the canon it must be authentic."

The concept of expanded apostolicity is needed in order to justify the canonical standing of Mark, Luke and Acts, all of which were received without demurrals at a very early date. This, however, appears as an artificial device to include under the same rule some writings whose acceptance had already been secured on other grounds.

The principle of expanded apostolicity was not applied uniformly by the Church since otherwise Clement's (Phil 4:3), Barnabas' and Polycarp's epistles should have been included (as some of them were temporarily) and should have retained their place in the canon to this day (as none of them did). The case of Polycarp is especially embarrassing since the author expressly denies having apostolic authority.<sup>1</sup>

The early Church did at times show some inadequacy in handling this criterion, since some important segments of the Church raised questions on that score against Hebrews and Revelation, which appeared as suspect on other grounds.

If a genuine apostolic writing were rediscovered in our day, this principle would demand the writing's immediate acceptance in the canon. Yet God evidently did not intend all inspired utterances to be included in the canon (John 21:25; 2 Cor 2:3-4[?]; Col 4:16), and it would seem strange that he would permit the Church to function for some 1900 years without a book that would have been inspired and written in the first century.

It places the decision in the hands of scholars whose spiritual discernment has not always matched their erudition.

On balance, the criterion of apostolicity is important but insufficient by itself alone to determine canonicity.

## II. ORTHODOXY

It goes almost without saying that any canonical book must be orthodox. God would not permit his Word to teach falsehood as well as truth.

1. *Positively.* All canonical books are indeed orthodox. The early Church did often mention this as a criterion and was helped in discarding unworthy materials by the application of this principle.

2. *Negatively.* This is a purely negative criterion. Nothing that violates it can be viewed as canonical: Orthodoxy is necessary, but it is far from sufficient. Thousands of books have been written that are orthodox but not canonical.

The early Church demonstrates that it was not easy to handle this criterion, for the west had some difficulty in acknowledging Hebrews, and the

<sup>1</sup> Pol. *Phil.* 3.

east long entertained reservations about Revelation. Luther furthermore rejected the full authority of James because he interpreted its teaching as clashing with Galatians and Romans.

This criterion tends to circular reasoning. Orthodoxy must be defined by the canon, and here it seems that the canon is defined by orthodoxy.

### III. CHRISTOCENTRICITY

This criterion, advocated by Martin Luther, was grounded in the correct observation that the whole Bible as a redemptive book has Jesus Christ as its center. As Pascal later wrote: "Jesus Christ whom both Testaments regard, the Old as its hope, the New as its model, and both as their center."<sup>2</sup>

1. *Positively.* It is indeed true that Jesus Christ is central to the whole Bible, although Luther was carried away at times into fanciful hermeneutics in his attempt to exhibit this principle.

2. *Negatively.* This is a purely negative principle to be used in connection with other criteria, such as apostolicity.

Many of Luther's own writings are Christocentric (e.g. *The Freedom of a Christian*), but they were never viewed as potential canonical books even by Luther's most emphatic followers.

Luther himself committed a very serious blunder by advocating the exclusion from the canon of Esther, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs and the epistle of James. Fortunately the Lutheran Church has not followed suit. It is interesting to note that Luther sooner eliminated a book from the canon than to admit an imperfection or error in a canonical book.

### IV. INSPIRATION

Since all the canonical books are inspired by God, some authors, including notably Laird Harris, have suggested that inspiration is really the criterion to be applied.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Positively.* There is indeed a correspondence between inspiration and canonicity. The statement of 2 Tim 3:16 is true for both testaments: "All Scripture is God-breathed." No noninspired book has a place in the canon.

2. *Negatively.* This appears to be a vicious circle. We were asking: "How do we recognize an inspired book so as to include it in the canon?" It is tautological to say, "We recognize it because it is inspired." In other words this criterion does not advance us by even one inch in our search.

It is not certain that even all the original human authors were conscious of being inspired. We know a book to be inspired because it is canonical. We

<sup>2</sup> R. Pascal, *Pensées* 740. Cf. *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago, 1952) 33.319.

<sup>3</sup> R. L. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957).

do not know how to recognize infallibly inspired books so as to assign them a place in the canon.

If this principle were as simple as it is thought to be by its advocates it is difficult to understand why it took the Church some 300 years to make up its mind on the exact list of NT books and why the problem of the OT Apocrypha still plagues some of us to this day.

#### V. THE TESTIMONY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT TO THE INDIVIDUAL CHRISTIAN

This criterion emphasizes that the supreme authority of Scripture is grounded in God's own accreditation and not in a human decision. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* stated:

The Scriptures manifest themselves to be the word of God by their majesty and purity [here follows a number of characteristics]: but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man, is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very word of God.<sup>4</sup>

1. *Positively.* The great positive significance of this remark is to be found in the fact that here the authority of Scripture is not grounded in a human decision, be it ever so impressive, but in the witness of God himself, the Holy Spirit, working in the minds and hearts of Christian people. One can hardly exaggerate the importance of this consideration, and we hope to validate it fully under the seventh criterion.

2. *Negatively.* This is not in fact the way in which the canon was formed. As individuals we do not receive a large bag of separate Bible passages out of which we should draw, as one draws a lottery number, in order to see which ones are confirmed by the Holy Spirit. Rather we are presented with a bound book, and it is as we read in the book that the Holy Spirit awakens in us the perception that this is God's Word.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* is misinterpreted if it is construed to assert that the canon is the result of an individual perception since in the second paragraph of the same first chapter a list of the canonical books is presented as binding on all believers.

In the way in which our Lord and the apostles referred to the OT it is clear that the appeal was to an accredited collection of books, not to individual passages privately perceived as divinely inspired. The existence of a publicly acknowledged canon of the OT bears witness by analogy to a similarly formed canon of the NT (see the seventh criterion).

#### VI. THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

It is the contention of the Roman Catholic Church that it is the prerogative of the Church to establish the canon and that those who reject the Church's authority have by that act logically cut themselves off from the

<sup>4</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 4.

principle that alone undergirds the appropriateness of the NT canon. "Scripture was produced by and attested in the Church," they say, "not the Church by Scripture."

1. *Positively.* There is here a remarkably simple answer to the question, "What is the NT canon?" This answer is the following: "Check with the Church that has the authority to establish it." This is something that the most simple can understand and do.

It is true that God gave his word to his people and that the question of the canon is to be settled in the community of faith.

The Roman Catholic Church certainly does have an appropriate NT canon.

2. *Negatively.* There are several fallacies in the Roman Catholic argument: (1) The OT existed before the NT Church. (2) The Church is under the authority of the Word and has no authority over the Word. (3) The Church's authority is at most designative, not constitutive. It may be compared to the power of the bailiff who announces: "Here comes the judge." (4) The rights of the eastern churches appear to have been overlooked in this argument.

The Roman Church has made an egregious mistake in this area by invading the realm of the OT canon and legislating the canonicity of the OT Apocrypha in spite of Jerome's clear warnings.

Over several centuries the historical attitude of the Roman Catholic Church toward the Bible and its use by laypeople may be characterized as hostile: For long decades they burned more Bibles than they published. We are glad to see some amelioration in the twentieth century.

VII. THE WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVEN CORPORATELY  
TO GOD'S PEOPLE AND MADE MANIFEST BY A NEARLY UNANIMOUS  
ACCEPTANCE OF THE NT CANON IN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

It is important to distinguish carefully between the sixth and seventh criteria. Here the purely designative function of the churches is specified, and it is viewed not as an act of authority but as the result of a special guidance of the Holy Spirit in this area.

1. *Positively.* This formulation takes account of the stunning near-unanimity of Christian churches on the scope of the NT canon: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Quaker, Disciples, Adventist, and even Universalist-Unitarian, Mormon, Christian Science and Jehovah's Witness churches all acknowledge precisely the same 27 books of the NT, even though some of these would ease greatly their own task by eliminating some of the books, as the Ebionites and gnostics of old had done.

Acceptance of this canon is not sufficient for a badge of orthodoxy, as our list makes abundantly plain, but on the question of the canon they do agree. We offer the explanation that this near-unanimity is due to the Holy Spirit's action and is not merely a fortuitous coincidence.

This approach provides a ready answer to the question of the canon: "Ask any Christian community."

There is a notable parallel here with the establishment of the OT canon. God entrusted his OT oracles to the Jews (Rom 3:2), and they were providentially guided in the recognition and preservation of the OT. Jesus and the apostles confirmed the rightness of their approach while castigating their attachment to a tradition that was superimposed on the Word of God (Matt 15:1–20; Mark 7:1–23). God entrusted his NT oracles to his people in the churches, and they are nearly unanimous in the recognition of the NT canon.

This approach approximates the order of events in life. People who are to be instructed in the Christian faith generally receive a bound copy of the Bible and seldom raise questions concerning the canon of either the OT or the NT. These questions arise much later, often after years of Christian life. This is particularly true of those who are born of Christian parents. The question of criteria of canonicity does not even arise in their infant minds.

This approach provides us with a relatively simple answer as to whether the canon remains open or is closed. The likelihood of an almost unanimous acceptance of additional books is indeed minimal.

The strength of this criterion increases as years pass by. In a sense we are privileged as compared with the people of the Church until AD 400, since they were exposed to some indecision with respect to the *antilegomena* (Hebrews, Revelation, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John and Jude). They were closer to the original oral message of Jesus and the apostles and on that account were perhaps in a lesser need of a fixed canon. Meanwhile, since the year AD 200 there has been consensus on the 20 other books, known as *homologoumena* ("agreed upon").

This criterion accommodates many of the factors that are good in the criteria previously discussed: (1) All NT writings are apostolic in the broad sense of the term. (2) They surely are orthodox. (3) They are centered in Christ and his work. (4) They are indeed inspired. (5) The Holy Spirit does bear witness to them, although not merely to individuals seeking to determine the canon. (6) They are officially endorsed by the churches. Many confessions give them specific endorsement, including the canons of the council of Trent, Philaret's *Longer Catechism of the Russian Church*, the *Gallic Confession*, the *Belgic Confession*, the *39 Articles*, the *Irish Articles of Religion*, the *Westminster Confession*, the *Savoy Declaration*, the *Second London Baptist Confession* and the *Confession of the Waldenses*.

This criterion is very ably presented in classic treatments.<sup>5</sup>

2. *Negatively.* Answers to objections: (1) Will this way of handling the canon put us back under the tutelage and authority of the Church of Rome? Absolutely not. The Church of Rome appears here not as our authority for the canon but as one of the churches whose position reflects the influence of the Holy Spirit. He is the authority, not the Church. Following the type of reasoning of the objector, one would have to say that our view of the canon

<sup>5</sup> L. Gaussen, *The Canon of the Holy Scriptures* (London: James Nisbet, 1862); A. Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth, 1959), esp. 319–354.

of the OT puts us under the authority of the synagogue. This is manifestly absurd. My speedometer registers the speed of my car, but it does not cause it. The cause of the speed is to be found in the motor. The consensus of churches on the NT is an index and evidence of the Holy Spirit's guidance. The Holy Spirit is the moving authoritative force.

(2) What if the Muslims argue as you do and say that the great consensus of Islam in their view of the Qur'an reflects God's authority for their canon? Perhaps they say that, but the cases are not parallel. If I mistake not, the Qur'an was produced entirely in the seventh century and is the work of one man. There never was a process as in the NT canon, with some centuries of debate and a stunning final consensus. The case of the Qur'an is more nearly analogous to the works of Homer or Shakespeare than to the NT.

(3) What if the early Church did not have access to this criterion? It is true that it did not, but it was closer to the living voice of Jesus and the apostles and thus could and did struggle better through a determination that we might not now be capable to make.

We receive as canonical Scriptures of the OT all the books that have been transmitted to us, under that title, by the universal consent of the Jewish people, to whom the oracles of God were entrusted under the Lord's guidance. And we receive equally as canonical Scriptures of the NT all the books that, under the guidance of the same Providence, have been transmitted to us as such by the universal consent of the churches of the Christian world.<sup>6</sup>

So maybe the Bible's table of contents is more "inspired" than was thought at first.

<sup>6</sup> *Confession of the Evangelical Free Church of Geneva*. Cf. *Creeeds of Christendom* (4th ed.; ed. P. Schaff; New York: Harper, 1919) 3.781.