

THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

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After almost 2000 years of church history how can Christians be sure that they have the right Bible? Can we indeed be absolutely certain that we have exactly the right books in the Bible - no more and no less? As our standard of faith and practice can we confidently appeal to the canon of Scripture as a collection of authoritative writings to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be taken away? What if archaeology uncovered an ancient epistle of Paul or another apostolic writer? Could such a hitherto lost document be added to the canon? While we may dismiss such a question as hypothetical, there are similar questions which are only too painfully relevant in the life of the church today. Can God speak authoritatively today, and if so should such revelation be regarded as on a par with Scripture - or perhaps even be added to Scripture? In other words, is the canon closed? If we say that it is, is it then not a logical impossibility to argue our position from Scripture?

These are some of the urgent questions to which a thoughtful consideration of our topic will inevitably lead. They are not only issues of abiding theological interest, but can at times also be matters of apologetic importance and even of pressing pastoral concern. Here we touch upon the very basis of our Christian faith and life, and it is vital that these foundations be secure. But how can this be established? How can we espouse a view of Scripture which *ipso facto* cannot be proved from Scripture itself?

To begin our investigation we will need to have a sound understanding of the terminology. Our English word "canon" is a loan-word from the Latin *canon*, which in turn was derived from the Greek *kanon*. For our purposes it is important to trace the linguistic development of the term. While the Greek word *kanon* does occur in the New Testament it cannot be translated by "canon" in English. In each case it is more suitably translated "rule" or "standard" (2 Cor.10:13,15,16; Gal.6:16; Phil.3:16). It will be noted that all the occurrences of the word are in Paul's writings, and in none of these instances is he referring to the canon of Scripture. That was to be a much later development. Movement in this direction occurred when "in the second century in the Christian church *kanon* came to stand for revealed truth, *rule of faith*."¹ It was not until the fourth century that the church began to refer to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as *ho kanon* ("the canon"). A parallel development took place in the history of the Latin term. In ecclesiastical Latin *canon* came to mean "a catalogue of sacred writings".²

The term "canon" as we use it when referring to the canon of Scripture is therefore not a use of the term in its biblical sense, but conforms to ecclesiastical usage from the fourth century onwards. This is also the way the word was used at the time of the Reformation. Particularly in the Reformed confessions the term is used almost exclusively of the "rule", "norm" or "established list" of the Scriptures.³ In these doctrinal statements it is closely conjoined to such concepts as "inspiration", "authority" and "the regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith". The idea of normativity comes very much to the forefront.

This immediately raises an important question. Whence is this normativity derived? What is its basis? These questions are far more difficult for the New Testament than for the Old. In the case of the Old Testament it can be convincingly demonstrated that Jesus placed his infallible seal of approval upon the canon as we now have it (Lk.24:25-27,44-45). His reference to "the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" reflects the traditional threefold division of the Hebrew canon. On this point there was no quarrel between him and the Pharisees. While the "closedness" of the Old Testament canon at the time of Jesus has become the subject of recent theological debate,⁴ it is fair to say that the traditional position has been challenged, but not shaken. Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries agreed on the limits of the Old Testament canon.

In the nature of the case such a statement of divine approval is impossible for the New Testament. We have no *post hoc* pronouncement from Christ to the effect that these 27 books, and these only, are authoritative, inspired and canonical. So how do we proceed? On what basis do we define the canon? On what or whose authority can it be established? How can we rest assured that the right books have been included?

¹ W.F. Arndt & F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, second edition, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, 403.

² C.T. Lewis & C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1962, 280.

³ e.g. Belgic Confession, Article 5, and Westminster Confession of Faith (1:3).

⁴ A discussion of the recent debate from an Evangelical viewpoint is offered by D.G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon", *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, edited by D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1986, 303-15. In the closing paragraphs of his discussion Dunbar concludes: "Placing a *terminus ad quem* on the completion of the Old Testament canon is difficult, partly due to an almost total lack of evidence. Ancient Jewish and Christian tradition connect the closing of the canon with the ministry of Ezra. But if the idea of the canon is a historical one that included the belief that the line of the ancient prophets had ceased, then a date subsequent to Ezra is more likely. ... What can be said with confidence is that *at least* a century before the Christian era, the Jews were conscious that prophecy in its classical form belonged to the past."

These questions have been tackled from a number of different perspectives - theological and historical, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, presuppositionally and evidentially. For a most satisfying approach it is perhaps best not to make these contrasts mutually exclusive, not to pit them against one another in an unhelpful way. To get the full picture we cannot divorce the historical evidence from our theological presuppositions. We cannot separate the *a priori* of our faith from the *a posteriori* of historical development. To do justice to the largeness of the question we will need to adopt a rather wide approach.

A. Historical Considerations

We have already seen that the Greek word *kanon* was not applied to the New Testament books before the middle of the fourth century.⁵ However, this does not mean that the idea of the canon did not exist earlier. Church history, from its beginnings till the end of the fourth century, is characterized by an increasing awareness of the canonicity of its sacred New Testament writings. In the words of Herman Ridderbos, "the history of the Canon is the process of the growing consciousness of the Church concerning its ecumenical foundation."⁶

From its earliest days the Christian community was aware that it had a body of writings equal in authority to the Old Testament and equally revelatory in character.⁷ However, the recognition of a closed collection of documents above all other literature was a gradual process that was not complete till the end of the fourth century.⁸ From the beginning Christians regarded the Jewish canon as distinctively their own. The body of literature which developed in their midst did not replace but supplemented the Jewish canon. Around 200AD we already find the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament", *palaia diatheke* and *kaine diatheke*.

The New Testament is not to be treated as a book that dropped straight down from heaven, that came *senkrecht von oben*. Its recognition by the Church was not immediate, but was historically qualified. It is to this process of a gradual and ever more precise canonical awareness that we must now devote our attention.

1. The New Testament Canon before 140

(a) An Awareness Within the New Testament Itself

At times the New Testament writers seemed plainly aware that they themselves or others were writing Scripture, e.g. 2 Pet.3:16 refers to Paul's letters and "the rest of the Scriptures". Especially the Book of Revelation seems rather self-consciously Scriptural (e.g. 1:3; 22:18,19). But these are mere "hints" compared to the authoritative tone conveyed by certain New Testament concepts. Three terms stand out:

(i) "Apostle"⁹: The concept of "apostle" is defined especially by the idea of authorization, by the transmission of definite powers. The apostles are Christ's representatives (Mt.10:40; cf. Jn.13:20). In a very special and exclusive manner he entrusted them with the preaching of the Gospel. He also endowed them with the Spirit of truth who would guide them into all the truth (Jn.14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15). They were thus the transmitters of revelation (Heb.2:4). The salvation that appeared in Jesus, first proclaimed by the Lord himself, was validly attested to by the apostles.

⁵ Its earliest attestation in this sense is in the writings of Athanasius, followed soon afterwards by the use of the Latin word *canon* by Jerome and Augustine in the same way.

⁶ H.Ridderbos, "The Canon of the New Testament", in C.F.Henry (ed.), *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958, 198.

⁷ This "canon awareness" on the part of the early Church is axiomatic for the discipline developed in recent years by B.S. Childs known as *canon criticism*. This is an approach to the books of the Bible which does not treat them as individual documents but rather as components of the completed corpus of Scripture. Childs explains the origin of the New Testament canon along the following lines: "Canon consciousness thus arose at the inception of the Christian church and lies deep within the New Testament literature itself. There is an organic continuity in the historical process of the development of an established canon of sacred writings from the earliest stages of the New Testament to the final canonical stabilization of its scope. That the continuity was hammered out in continuous conflict is also true." (B.S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, 21).

⁸ As Childs observes, "the process of the formation of authoritative religious writings long preceded the the particular designation of the collection as canon in the fourth century", *The New Testament as Canon*, 25.

⁹ For this and the following categories a more detailed discussion can be found in H. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, translated by H. De Jongste and revised by R.B. Gaffin, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988, 12-24.

(ii) "Witness": The apostles were witnesses of the salvation revealed in Christ. This concept should be understood in a forensic way. The apostles were eyewitnesses and they bear this testimony for the forum of the coming Church and the entire world. This testimony is both oral (preaching) and written (New Testament documents).

(iii) "Tradition"¹⁰: In the New Testament this is a very authoritative concept. It means 'what has been handed down with authority'. In apostolic times equal significance is given to oral and written proclamation. The New Testament writings "are partially the remains and fixation of a previous oral tradition"¹¹. The source of the New Testament tradition lies in the apostles, e.g. 1 Cor.15:1-4. Paul both receives and transmits tradition. A personal power is involved here, viz. that of the apostles. They had received authority from Christ to do this. The tradition of which the New Testament speaks is therefore not an unchanneled stream which is then perpetuated as the faith or theology of the Church. It is rather the authoritative proclamation entrusted to the apostles, as the witnesses of Christ and as the foundation of the Church.

Although the importance of apostolic witness and tradition is hard to exaggerate, the authority of the apostles should be seen in its proper perspective. B.B. Warfield gives more content to apostolic authority than is warranted by the New Testament itself. In his view the New Testament canon was imposed by the apostles on the Church. Thus the canon was not only complete but also fully and finally accepted by the end of the first century. In an article originally published in 1892 Warfield writes:

"In every case the principle on which a book was accepted, or doubts about it laid aside, was the historical tradition of apostolicity". However, "the principle of canonicity was not apostolic authorship, but *imposition by the apostles as 'law'*"¹².

Warfield then further explains,

The authority of the apostles, as by divine appointment founders of the Church, was embodied in whatever books they imposed on the Church as law, not merely in those they themselves had written.¹³

In his position Warfield is obviously taking apostolic authorship too far. Not only is it difficult to conceive how the apostles could impose books on the Church as law, there is no historical evidence for any such apostolic imposition. Perhaps this is the reason why Warfield's discussion does not proceed beyond the second century. He completely leaves out of the question the whole "recognition" element on the part of the Church. His view simply cannot account for the diversity of opinions regarding the limits of the New Testament which prevailed for decades and even for centuries.

Warfield's position certainly simplifies the canon question by making the New Testament a closed book by the end of the first century, but it fails to do justice to the historical facts. We must pay attention to the diversity of opinions that came to expression in the early church.

(b) *The Apostolic Fathers:*

Their concerns were more with practical and moral issues than with theological reflection. The works of these early Christian writers contain no formulated doctrine of Scripture or canon, and yet there is much that is suggestive of later development.

(i) Clement of Rome: Writing in about the year 96 Clement emphasizes the importance of apostolic authority: "The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in good order."¹⁴ His only specific references to the New Testament are from 1 Corinthians and Hebrews. However, there is evidence of his familiarity with a wider range of the canonical materials. Yet Clement has no formal theory of the New Testament canon. While the tradition that derives from Jesus and the apostles is authoritative, it is not authoritative in a specific form.

(ii) Ignatius of Antioch: Around 115 Ignatius stated that the teachings of the apostles are known through their writings. There is, however, no indication that he viewed the apostolic writings as Scripture parallel to the Old Testament. For him the issue is the authority of the revelation - not its form, whether oral or written.

¹⁰ This concept is represented in the NT by the noun *paradosis* and its cognate verb *paradidomi*.

¹¹ Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963, 18.

¹² B.B. Warfield, "The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament", *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, edited by S.G. Craig, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1959, 415.

¹³ *Inspiration and Authority*, 416.

¹⁴ 1 Clement 42:1,2, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, second edition, edited and translated by J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, edited and revised by M.W. Holmes, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992, 75.

(iii) Polycarp (d.155): Like Clement and Ignatius, Polycarp sees an integral unity between the Old Testament and the apostles. However, he moves beyond his predecessors in that for him the importance of the Old Testament has receded in favour of the increased esteem given to the writings of the apostles, particularly Paul.

(iv) The Epistle of Barnabas (ca.130): Most of this epistle is a polemical foray into interpreting the Old Testament. *Barnabas* wrestles with the problem of continuity/discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants. Generous use is made of the Old Covenant to show how it points to Christ. *Barnabas* indicates that as the problems of Old Testament interpretation grew, the Church would become more conscious of its literature as forming a complementary Scripture (the *New Testament*). He cites Matthew 22:14 with the formula "it is written".

(v) "Gospel" and "Apostle": According to F.F.Bruce ¹⁵, in the early years of the second century two Christian collections of authoritative documents were current. One was called "The Gospel" (with sub-headings "According to Matthew", etc.). The other was "The Apostle", i.e. the Pauline corpus (with sub-headings "To the Romans", etc.). Soon these two parts were to be connected by the Book of Acts which brought the two collections together. The implications of this were significant, as Bruce explains:

So long as the fourfold Gospel and the Pauline collection circulated separately, one can hardly speak of a canon, even in embryo. The bringing together of the two collections into one was facilitated by the existence of Acts, the hinge which joined the two. ... Acts provided the central structure of an edifice which now took on the shape of the canon as we have received it.¹⁶

So, already at this early stage, the Church was making progress in the recognition of an authoritative collection of Christian books. Just before the middle of the second century something happened to speed up that progress and give it greater precision than had characterized it up until that time.

2. The New Testament Canon between 140 and 220

The early years of this period witnessed the rise of several strong heretical movements:

(a) Marcionism

About the year 140 the Roman church received a visit from Marcion, a native of Asia Minor. He presented his teachings to the presbyters at Rome, but they found it utterly unacceptable, which was not surprising considering his radical Gnostic views. He rejected the Old Testament entirely and regarded the God depicted there as an inferior Being. Jesus had come to liberate mankind from the authority of the God of the Old Testament and to reveal the superior God of goodness and mercy whom he called the Father. But this message had been obscured in the Gospel by Judaizing corruptions. Paul and Luke were the only ones to find favour with Marcion and these only partially. So what Marcion did was to set up a canon, a definite group of books which he regarded as fully authoritative, replacing all others. These comprised ten of the Pauline epistles (without the Pastorals) and Luke's Gospel. He seems to have edited these books, purging them of what did not accord with his views.

Marcion's views were dangerous and widespread. The Marcionites were the first to have a clearly defined canon. The compilation of this canon was a challenge and incentive to the church of Rome and the other churches who held to the same doctrine. If these churches denied that Marcion's canon was the true one, then let them show what the true one really was. Before we examine the Church's response, we need to consider other heretical groups which may have contributed to this precipitating factor.

(b) Gnosticism

While the origins of Gnosticism are not certain, it is clear that the movement came to full bloom in the middle of the second century. With its idea of an esoteric *gnosis* ('knowledge') it raised in more acute form the questions of tradition and authority that engaged the Apostolic Fathers. The Nag Hammadi finds of 1946 have provided us with fresh insights into their teachings. Chief among the finds was *The Gospel of Thomas* which is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus and which has been proposed as a source for reliable traditions about the historical Jesus. Another significant Gnostic work was the apocryphal *Gospel of Truth* written in Rome ca. 140. The author used practically the same books as our present New Testament canon and the manner in which he treats these documents proves that they had authority for him. However, for the Gnostics true *gnosis* was beyond Scripture. Although they attributed their apocryphal writings to various apostles, they at times portray the apostles themselves as

¹⁵ *The Spreading Flame*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958, 226.

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, "Canon", *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, edited by J.B. Green and S. McKnight, Downers Grove/Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1992, 95.

deficient in knowledge. While they did not delimit the canon as Marcion did, the Gnostics also performed a catalytic function in the formation of the canon. As David Dunbar concludes:

Gnosticism's effect on the Church was to intensify its concern for faith adherence to the teaching of the apostles. The necessity for a concrete standard by which to evaluate the Church tradition pressed the orthodox Fathers from Irenaeus onward to focus more consciously on Scripture as the written fixation of the apostolic tradition.¹⁷

(c) Montanism

Later in the second century orthodoxy was to be challenged from yet another direction. Montanism was a movement that started ca. 156 in Phrygia in Asia Minor. Its leader, Montanus, believed that Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit (Paraclete) had now been fulfilled. Montanus was the Paraclete's mouthpiece. The coming of the Paraclete was the immediate prelude to the second advent of Christ and the establishment of the New Jerusalem in one of the towns of Phrygia. Montanism spread throughout the empire. By the end of the second century it had made one of its most illustrious converts in Tertullian of Carthage.

While Montanism stressed the renewal of the prophetic gift and taught that the Holy Spirit was manifesting himself supernaturally through entranced prophets and prophetesses (notably Montanus himself), the result of the Montanist challenge on the question of the canon has long been debated. The claim to inspiration by the Holy Spirit certainly challenged the Church's understanding of authority. However, such influence as the New Prophecy had on the emergent canon was certainly indirect. Montanist polemic comprised no attack upon the authority or validity of the Biblical writings (Old or New Testament). Nor were the Montanist oracles, collected in written form, seen as equivalent to Scripture.¹⁸

(d) The Church's Response

Nobody can doubt that Marcion, the Gnostics and Montanus forced reflection on the canon question. But what was the nature of the response it evoked in the Church? Opinion is sharply divided on this question. There are two basic points of view - the liberal and the conservative. The canon debate was epitomized in the work of two opposing German scholars. On the liberal side stood Adolf von Harnack. His staunchest opponent from the conservative camp was Theodor Zahn.

Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) was the leading liberal theologian in Germany in the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In his view primitive Christianity was a religion of the Spirit, not of the letter. Oral tradition was supreme. Written documents had no official status. The heretics were the first to occupy themselves with the idea of a canon of authoritative writings. Marcion is the creator of the New Testament canon and is primarily responsible for the idea of the New Testament. In the light of this situation we are to understand the activity of the Church. In defending its position the Church felt compelled to create its own canon. The Church follows the lead of Marcion, but comes up with different results. Harnack thinks this was necessary, as oral tradition tends to become self-contradictory. As time passes there is a need to distinguish what is true from what is false in both oral and written tradition. In this the Christian Church goes counter to its genius. Christianity becomes a book religion and its essence is obscured. Its genius was recovered in nineteenth century liberal theology.¹⁹

Harnack's view has been very influential and has long represented the liberal consensus. It met with strong opposition from conservative scholarship.

Theodor Zahn (1838-1933) was a staunchly conservative scholar in the Lutheran tradition and an implacable foe of theological liberalism. His major works were *Geschichte des Kanons* (1888-90) and *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (1906). He did much valuable research in the area of patristics and was unrivalled in his field.

His approach is to begin with the first point which stands in a clear light.²⁰ He then works back as far as evidence will permit, i.e. to the origin or beginning of a process. Then he works in the other direction. This method leads him to conclude that from the

¹⁷ "The Biblical Canon", 331.

¹⁸ Dunbar, 338.

¹⁹ Harnack's discussion of the canon question appeared in English translation under the title, *The Origin of the New Testament*, London: Williams & Norgate, 1925.

²⁰ Zahn explains his methodology as follows: "Da uns keine Nachrichten über die Entstehung des NT's zu Gebote stehen, so sind wir darauf angewiesen, von einem in hellerem Licht stehenden Punkt der Entwicklung aus rückwärts schreitend, unter sorgfältiger Berücksichtigung der einschlagenden Tatsachen, welche uns auf diesem Wege aufstoßen, dem Ursprung näher zu kommen." (Th. Zahn, *Grundriss der Geschichte des Neutestamentlichen Kanons: Eine Ergänzung zu der Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, second edition, Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1904, 14). Immediately following this explanation Zahn turns his attention to a discussion of Marcion, the Gnostics and Montanism. It was in contradistinction to these three movements that the early Church began to define its collection of authoritative writings with ever greater clarity. Ironically it was the heretics who provided

beginning the Church had a New Testament in addition to the Jewish canon. The Church has shown an implicit awareness of this new collection of writings, and of the fact that this collection stands on a par with the Old Testament with respect to authority. The significance of heresies was that it forced the Church into a clearer understanding of what it had. The function of heresy is catalytic and not constitutive. It hastened a process. This explains why it is that during the period 170-220 we get a clear glimpse of what was held to be the canon for the first time.

Zahn's position has in essence been the basic orthodox position ever since. For example, in 1986 David Dunbar could write:

The oral and written apostolic witness to Christ was that from which the primitive Church drew its life. The process by which the written form of that witness rose to increasing prominence and was gradually defined in the canonical understanding of the Church was both natural and spontaneous. The process was, to a great extent, underway before the Christian community was aware of its implications. From this perspective the sharp reaction of the Fathers to Marcion and the Gnostics is to be seen, not as a *de novo* selection of an alternative canon, but rather as a making explicit of what had always been implicit in the life of the Church"²¹

(e) *Evidence of the Church's Response*

Zahn began with points that stand in a clear light. We now need to consider some of the historical evidence which provides the underpinning for his position:

(i) The Muratorian Canon: This document gives a list of the canonical books with some comments. It was discovered in 1740 by the antiquarian L.A. Muratori. It is believed to have been written in Rome towards the end of the second century. It is the earliest extant document in which the canon is treated in a formal fashion. It states what documents are to be regarded as canonical and which are to be rejected²². It is unfortunately a fragment. The meaning is also obscure at points. It lists all the books of our New Testament except Hebrews, James and 2 Peter. There is also a question as to whether 1 Peter is mentioned. It includes one book, the Apocalypse of Peter (2 Peter?), which was subsequently rejected. The author of the Muratorian Canon himself has his hesitations about the book, for he notes that some do not accept it. The main value of the Muratorian Canon is that it indicates the books which were recognized as canonical in the Roman church towards the end of the second century. In this document we are already very close to our New Testament.²³

(ii) Irenaeus (ca.130-200), whose writings are contemporary with the Muratorian list, presents the same picture. His evidence is significant in that he was a rather ecumenical figure in his day. He spent his earlier life in Asia Minor and his later life in Gaul. He was also in close touch with Rome. He does not seem to have had Hebrews in his canon, and there is some uncertainty as to whether he accepted the general epistles (except 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John). He refers to the *Shepherd of Hermas* as "scripture" but does not include it in the list of apostolic writings.

(iii) Tertullian (ca.160-220) is our authority for Africa. He appears to have had 22 books in his canon - the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Jude and Revelation. He did not treat Hebrews as canonical.

(iv) Origen (ca.185-254) in the East has a good deal to say about the canon. According to F.F. Bruce, "He acknowledged the four canonical Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline epistles and Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation as 'undisputed' books."²⁴ Origen does acknowledge, however, that Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude were rejected by some.

(f) *Summary*

By the year 220 the status of the various writings of the New Testament are broadly as follows:

Zahn with some of the most substantial evidence for his position. It was because of their activity that the Church developed a clearer awareness of what it already had.

²¹ Dunbar, 357.

²² For a translation of the manuscript see F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 232-4.

²³ Although an early date for the Muratorian fragment has been the traditional view and has been upheld in recent times by both F.F. Bruce and B.M. Metzger, it has not been without its critics. A.G. Patzia has therefore sounded a note of caution: "The enthusiasm for the value of the Fragment has been challenged in recent scholarship. A.C. Sundberg's analysis led him to propose a fourth-century date and an Eastern setting ... Among Sundberg's objections to an early date for the Fragment are its attitude toward the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the fact that there are no similar lists until the time of Eusebius in the fourth century." (A.G. Patzia, "Canon", *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, edited by G.F. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin, Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993, 90).

²⁴ "Canon", 98.

(i) The Gospels: They are one of the best attested sections of the New Testament during this period. In contrast to Marcion's one Gospel (Luke) and the Gnostics' *Gospel of Truth*, Irenaeus maintains that the Church recognizes four Gospels. There need to be four Gospels, he says, because there are four parts of the world and four winds (a rather quaint *a posteriori* argument!).

(ii) Acts: By this time it is acknowledged as the work of Luke. It has a secure position between the Gospels and the letters of Paul.

(iii) Paul: All thirteen letters are universally received and accepted. The unity of the Pauline material was recognized.

(iv) Hebrews: There is a sharp difference in the Church at this time concerning its canonicity. The Eastern Church which was strongly influenced by the Alexandrian theologians, Clement and Origen, readily accepted it as a letter of Paul. In the Western Church it was not accorded canonical status till late in the fourth century. This was because Pauline authorship of this epistle had at an early stage been denied in the West. Non-apostolic authorship was a dogmatic consideration.

(v) The Catholic Epistles have various positions of security at this time:

James is an epistle over which there is again a sharp division of opinion. In the Eastern Church it is one of the books accepted without question, although in some circles as late as 325 it is regarded as a forgery.

1 Peter has a firm place in the canon. (Its omission from the Muratorian Canon was probably a scribal accident). The opposite is true for 2 Peter. Its history is very uncertain. Some believe the Muratorian Canon rejects 2 Peter. Others identify it with the *Apocalypse of Peter* (see above). There is no evidence of its canonicity before 350. It was rejected by the Syrian Church till the fifth century. It is difficult to determine the grounds for uncertainty. There is nothing of the modern trend to play off its theology against that of 1 Peter.

1 John was generally received. From a historical perspective 2 and 3 John have an uncertain position. Only by the fourth century are they received as canonical. It has been suggested that at this time all three letters were called "The Epistles of John". Because of their brevity 2 and 3 John may have circulated with 1 John. The Muratorian Canon refers to two epistles of John.

Jude is accepted in the Muratorian Canon and appealed to by Clement, Tertullian and Origen. However, it is not universally accepted. Around 360 it is not part of the canon in the Syrian and African Churches.

(vi) Revelation has quite a secure position at this time, although there is still some opposition. Irenaeus, Clement and Tertullian refer to it as "The Apocalypse" although the spurious *Apocalypse of Peter* was also circulating at the time. Of the latter the Muratorian Canon notes that "some of our people refuse to have it read in the Church".

(vii) Other Writings: Tertullian, Irenaeus and Clement cite the *Shepherd of Hermas* as Scripture. However, after 200 a series of ecclesiastical decisions began to loosen the bond between *The Shepherd* and other books. It is done rather mildly - it is to be read privately and for edification, but not to be read publicly with the prophets and the apostles. This attitude is already expressed in the Muratorian Canon which states: "..... it should be read, indeed, but it cannot be published to the people in Church either along with the prophets, whose number is complete, or with the apostles of these last days."²⁵ This seems to be an attempt to develop a deutero-canon. This attitude, however, seals the fate of *The Shepherd*.

The letters of Clement of Rome, especially 1 Clement (95AD), were used in worship services, particularly in Corinth. However, 1 Clement never enjoyed widespread canonical recognition. The *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Didache*, and the *Acts of Paul* (Latin) were other such documents. They were accepted for a time in limited circles, but eventually were excluded by all.

(g) Evaluation

By the end of the second century the canon was taking shape throughout Christendom. Twenty-three of the twenty-seven books are unquestionably part of the authoritative collection at this time. Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Revelation, the *Didache*, the *Shepherd of Hermas* and 1 Clement have a doubtful position. The canonization process was hastened during the second century because of the catalytic activity of heretical groups.

Historically there are four factors which favour Zahn's position:

²⁵ See Bruce, *Spreading Flame*, 234.

(i) The way in which the Fathers express themselves concerning the canon provides no evidence for Harnack's theory. It excludes the notion that around 150 the New Testament was established for the first time and that it was preceded by a canonless period.

(ii) We are not yet in the time of a state church. The local churches are still autonomous. The Church did not yet possess the instrumentation and structure to assure that all accepted the same canon and to suppress deviations in some other part of the Church. Harnack's point of view requires a church situation which did not yet exist.

(iii) Supposing the Church had such an implementation, the attempt to impose a canon would have run aground because of the respective peculiarities of regional churches. There is no evidence for a judicial battle over the canon at this time.

(iv) The strongest argument for Zahn is the state of the New Testament around 200. Basic agreement coupled with random disagreement characterizes this period. Difference of opinion rages over some books. The idea of fluid boundaries is unthinkable if (according to Harnack) the Church is creating a canon in response to Marcion. The Church's canon would then have been defined as exactly as Marcion's. Agreement and random disagreement point to an organic, spontaneous process of development uncoerced by any instrument of authority.²⁶

In short, the status of the canon between 170 and 220 indicates that the Church was conscious of a canon both now and earlier. The New Testament as an idea or a concrete phenomenon was not something thrust abruptly into the life of the Church between 150 and 170 .

3. The Third and Fourth Centuries (220-400)

Between 170 and 220 the basic contours are closely drawn by the Church due to the catalytic effect of mid-second century heresies, especially Marcionism. Subsequent history is almost solely a matter of two mutually related processes: (a) fixing with ever greater exclusiveness and hardening of line the limits of the canon, and (b) ever more widespread recognition of the canon increasing to the point of universal acceptance. A brief survey of this development will be in order:

(a) Eusebius (ca. 260-340)

With him we reach a very important landmark in the history of the canon. He provides us with a full statement in which he explains the position taken up in the Church at large. He makes an important distinction between *homologoumena* ('recognized books') and *antilegomena* ('disputed books') as follows:

i) The recognised books are the Gospels, Acts, the epistles of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 John, and "perhaps Revelation" (if written by the apostle).

(ii) He divides the disputed books into two sub-classes:

(1) those that ought to be included in the canon - James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John.

(2) those that ought not to be included - the *Acts of Paul*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Didache*, *Barnabas* and "perhaps Revelation" (i.e. if not apostolic).²⁷

Apart from his hesitation on Revelation Eusebius' New Testament is identical to ours.

(b) Athanasius (296-373)

The first time we have a list of the New Testament books which coincides exactly with our New Testament (containing no more and no less) is in the thirty-ninth Festal Letter of Athanasius (367AD). He circulated it in the administration of his pastoral duties to advise his clergy of the date of Easter etc. He makes a sharp distinction between "canonical writings" (the 27 books and these alone) and "those worthy of reading" (Old Testament Apocrypha²⁸, *The Shepherd* and the *Didache*). Having listed the canonical books in his Festal Letter Athanasius then adds: "These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the

²⁶ Zahn, *Grundriss*, 27.

²⁷ Eusebius, "Church History", *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, volume 1, edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952, 133-35.

²⁸ The Old Testament Apocrypha were never accepted as part of the Jewish canon. They were appended to copies of the LXX rather ignorantly by the early Christians. Hence they began to circulate as Scripture in the Church. Jerome apparently challenged Augustine on this, but without success. The practice was again tackled at the time of the Reformation. (Dunbar, 310).

living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these".²⁹

(c) *Decisions of Councils*

- (i) The Greek Church: Athanasius' letter takes on judicial force and no conciliar decision is needed.
- (ii) The Latin Church: The Synod at Rome in 382 recognized the 27 books and them alone as canonical. (Jerome's Vulgate which appeared shortly after this contained the 27 books).
- (iii) The African Church: The synods at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 ratify the synod at Rome.
- (iv) The Syrian Church: The Peshitta version which includes 22 New Testament books omits 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. The native (as opposed to the Greek speaking) Syrian Church recognizes only the more limited canon of the Peshitta to the present day.³⁰
- (v) The Ethiopian Church acknowledges the canonical books of the larger Christian Church plus eight additional works dealing primarily with church order.

So although the consensus was not perfect, by the end of the fourth century the New Testament canon is officially fixed in the sense of being ecclesiastically defined and universally accepted. From this time on there was no real challenge to the canon until the time of the Enlightenment.

B. Theological Reflection

Our treatment of the subject would hardly be complete without putting it into some theological perspective. Of course this has already been implicit in our tracing the historical development of the canon, but now we have come to the point where several theological perspectives need to be explicitly stated:

1. The Significance of History

The virtual unanimity with which the Church received the writings of the New Testament can be seen in the light of the special guidance and providence of God. The Reformed theologian, Louis Gaussen, in the nineteenth century saw this as evidence "that a concealed but almighty hand has been here interposed, and that the Head of the Church watches in silence over the new Oracles as he has watched over the old, preserving them from age to age against the folly of men."³¹

This divine providence is apparent from the fact that the reception of the canon was a growing grass-roots consensus rather than a decision that was handed down by ecclesiastical authorities. The canon was not imposed by the apostles (Warfield)³², but neither was it imposed by church leaders or by councils. Athanasius was no innovator. He simply set his seal on what the Church had been doing for a long time. Such councils as there were, were late and few. They stand at the end of the process rather than at the beginning. No action of a council or a synod was early enough to have had a decisive influence on the course of events. The historical evidence suggests that in the course of the three centuries following its completion the canon gradually commended itself to the Church. This is quite in accordance with Christ's promise of the Holy Spirit to his disciples. He is the Spirit of truth who will guide them into all the truth (John 16:13; cf. 14:26; 15:26).

2. The Role of the Church:

The slowness with which the canon was formed has led some to the conclusion that "the Church gave us the Bible". In the contemporary discussion this position has been strongly argued by the conservative Catholic scholar, Nicolaus Appel³³. He sees the canon as an ecclesiastical decision made in the postapostolic age. In this period the Church came to a deeper consciousness of a canon and to a true insight into the shape and boundaries of this canon. Only on the ground of an infallibly guided Church can there be a secure canon. The infallibility of the canon depends on the infallibility of the Church.

Leon Morris has given a concise answer to the question, "Did the Church originate the canon?":

²⁹ Athanasius, "From Letter XXXIX", *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, volume 4, edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, 552.

³⁰ Dunbar, 317.

³¹ Quoted by Dunbar, 344.

³² See above.

³³ N. Appel, *Kanon und Kirche. Die Kanonkrise im heutigen Protestantismus als kontroverstheologisches Problem*, Paderborn: Bonafacius-Druckerei, 1964.

"The Church did not originate the Bible. Its inspiration is divine, not ecclesiastical. It stands or falls because of its relationship to God, not to the Church. Moreover, any official action of the Church is late. We do not find it before the last part of the fourth century. But by then the canon had to all its intents and purposes been decided."³⁴

The wording of the conciliar decisions is also significant here. The decrees are never in the form: "This council decrees that henceforth such and such books are to be canonical". The Church never attempted to confer canonicity. The Church did not give authority to the canon, rather it *recognized* its authority. Hence the conciliar decrees have the form: "This council declares that these are the books which have always been held to be canonical". It would therefore be truer to say that the canon selected itself than that the Church selected it. Canonicity is something in the book itself, something that God has given to it, not a favoured status that the Church confers upon it.³⁵

Herman Ridderbos sums up the situation rather aptly:

It must be emphasized that the Church does not control the Canon, but the Canon controls the Church. For the same reason the Canon cannot be the product of the decision of the Church. The Church cannot 'make' or 'lay down' its own standard. All that the Church can lay down is this, that it has received the Canon as a standard and rule for faith and life, handed down to it with absolute authority.³⁶

3. The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit³⁷

Roman Catholic theologians have traditionally held that the authority of the canon was guaranteed by an infallible Church. The Reformers sensed here a threat to the *sola Scriptura* principle. For them the authority of Scripture was not dependent on the Church. Rather it was self-authenticating and sealed to the hearts of God's people by the witness of the Holy Spirit. (However, this witness was generally appealed to more to affirm the overall authority of the Bible than to validate the specific contents of the canon. For this, appeal was made to God's overriding providence).

The Scripture is of divine origin, character and authority. It bears the marks of its divinity. It clearly evidences that it is of God, but man is unable to perceive this on his own and hence needs the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.³⁸ The Reformed and Roman Catholic positions are clearly contrasted in the Belgic Confession, Article 5 ("The Authority of Scripture"):

We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them - not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and because they prove themselves to be from God.³⁹

The internal witness of the Holy Spirit is not communication of additional information. It is not a divinely given proposition. It is simply one aspect of the organic action of the sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit. It is always *cum verbo* ('with the Word'). It is an integral element of the process by which the mind of the sinner is enlightened and his will renewed (1 Cor.2:10-16; 1

³⁴ L.Morris, "Canon of the New Testament", in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, volume 2, edited by G.G.Cohen, Marshallton, Delaware: The National Foundation for Christian Education, 1968, 337.

³⁵ cf. Morris, 338.

³⁶ "Canon of the New Testament", 196.

³⁷ For a detailed discussion of this subject see John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture", *The Infallible Word*, edited by Paul Woolley, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967, 46-54.

³⁸ As Calvin said, "For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit", *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, volume 1, edited by J.T. McNeill and translated by F.L. Battles, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, 79. Although in the context of this statement Calvin is not addressing the canon question per se, his argument has direct bearing on the issue of canonicity. Book 1, chapter 7, from which this quote is taken, bears the title: "Scripture must be confirmed by the witness of the Spirit. Thus may its authority be established as certain; and it is a wicked falsehood that its credibility depends on the judgment of the church." Throughout this chapter Calvin strongly argues the point that the canon derives its authority not from the Church but from God. Scripture does not need to be authenticated by the Church nor by any human authority because it is self-authenticating. As Calvin says in section 4 of this chapter: "If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences ... we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit."

³⁹ "The Belgic Confession", *The Book of Forms -Reformed Churches of Australia*, Geelong: Reformed Churches Publishing House, 1991, 21.

Thess.2:4,13). John Murray refers to it as "supplementary attestation",⁴⁰ i.e. in addition to the objective excellencies inherent in Scripture. The Word must be allowed to establish its own claim, i.e. independently of the Church.

4. Criteria of Canonicity:

An appreciation of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit will enable us to view the proposed criteria of canonicity in their proper perspective. While certain criteria may appear to solve the canon question they are all in the nature of the case *a posteriori*. The art will be to isolate "factor x" as the index mark of canonicity. While a number of plausible suggestions have been made throughout the history of the Church, no conclusive criteria have successfully been established. Some examples:

(a) *Apostolicity*: This criterion was certainly operative in the life of the ancient Church. Its application in some circles clearly contributed to the tardy acceptance of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation. At times this criterion is modified to apostolic environment, if not exact authorship, such as in the case of Luke and Mark. But this weakens apostolicity as a criterion. Other writings, which were not included in the canon, could nevertheless have unequivocally claimed apostolic authorship (1 Cor.5:9 and Col.4:16). Apostolicity falls far short of being an all-embracing criterion for canonicity. Although he defines apostolicity very generously as "what was characteristic of the earliest church", H. Gamble is still careful not to overrate it as a criterion: "Widespread and important as this criterion was, it must still be said that no NT writing secured canonical standing on the basis of apostolicity alone."⁴¹

(b) *Public Lection*: Zahn believed that the important factor in canonical development was the use of the New Testament writings in the worship of the Church. It was the suitability of the writings for this purpose that gave them a place in the canon. But this criterion does not do justice to the facts.⁴² The *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Didache* were so used at an early point. On the other hand, there is little evidence to suggest that 2 Peter, 3 John and Jude were used for public lection in the early Church. As was the case with apostolicity, Gamble also expresses positive appreciation for this criterion, but again not without qualification: "This criterion was not definitive: many documents which met it quite adequately were not admitted into the canon ... while other writings lacking longstanding and broad currency nevertheless did gain canonical recognition, although tardily."⁴³

(c) *Christological Concentration*: This was Luther's criterion of canonicity. He used the motto: "Was Christum treibet und prediget" ('what urges and preaches Christ'). In practice this approach resulted in "a canon within a canon". Luther relegated four books to a secondary position, putting Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation at the end of his New Testament in a detached position. Hence this criterion tends to destroy the canon in any traditional sense of the term. It can vary to the extent that the person applying the principle thinks what "urges Christ". However, the churches of the Reformation (including the Lutherans) held more closely to the views of Calvin than those of Luther in these matters and the 27 books of the New Testament maintained their position. (Luther's influence is still detected in some Bible translations of the period, e.g. Tyndale's which places Hebrews and James with Jude and Revelation at the end of the New Testament collection).

(d) *Evaluation*: Further proposed criteria for canonicity could be discussed, such as antiquity, catholicity, inspiration and orthodoxy.⁴⁴ Historically, however, all attempts to establish such criteria have failed. More to the point is the observation that all attempts to establish criteria must in principle fail and in fact destroy the canonicity of the New Testament. This is true even in the case of apostolicity and Christocentricity. It is impossible to isolate "factor x"⁴⁵. It would mean subjecting the canon to fallible human insight and this destroys the absolute authority of the canon. To rationalize this phenomenon rests upon man's autonomy. An Archimedean point is then placed above the canon. A criterion would embrace the canon and hence undercut it. We are shut up to the canon as a self-establishing entity (cf. internal testimony). Canonicity is a unique concept. It coincides neither with what is apostolic nor with what appears to be "Christological". The canon is the highest authority and we cannot appeal to a higher authority to validate the canon.

Admittedly this approach is heavily presuppositional and *a priori*. The Scripture is self-authenticating. History shows that it commended itself to the Church. The historical development of the canon concept is quite in harmony with our presuppositions about the nature of its authority.

⁴⁰ "The Attestation of Scripture", 42ff.

⁴¹ H. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985, 68.

⁴² E.F. Harrison makes a fair evaluation of Zahn's argument at this point: "Zahn's view has a measure of truth, surely, but it would be hard to substantiate in the case of all the books of the New Testament, some of which are obviously less suited than others for ecclesiastical use because of their brevity and in some cases their rather private character," *Introduction to the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, 116.

⁴³ Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 71.

⁴⁴ See Gamble, 67-72.

⁴⁵ John Calvin claims as much in a slightly different context, in his discussion of the Scripture's own authentication: "We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as to a thing far beyond any guesswork!" (*Institutes*, volume 1, 80).

5. *Redemptive-Historical Considerations:*

The notion of redemptive history must be briefly considered at this point. Herman Ridderbos has made the astute observation that the authority of the canon is not to be sought in the history of the Church, but in the history of redemption:

In the New Testament the connection is inseparable between the main events of redemption and their announcement and transmission. The announcement of redemption is inseparable from the history of redemption itself.⁴⁶

This is not to set up an extra-biblical criterion, for the entire spectrum of Scripture from creation to consummation must be seen as a redemptive-historical process. God provides a verbal commentary on his redemptive activity. The New Testament is the record, the testimony of God's redeeming activity. Hence the New Testament is itself a phenomenon in the history of redemption. It is a phenomenon in the history to which it bears witness. The basic principle, therefore, is the correlation of redemptive act and its revelatory attestation. God's deed and Word go together. God speaks, but his speech is related to his action. This correlation is also applicable to the history in its unfolding. High points in the history of redemption are also high points in the history of revelation. To quote Ridderbos again:

In conclusion we can only say that the deepest foundation of the canon can only lie in Christ himself, and in the nature of his coming and work. The very basis or ground for the recognition of the canon is, therefore, in principle redemptive-historical. ... For Christ is not only himself the canon in which God comes to the world, and in which he glorifies himself in contrast to the world, but Christ establishes the canon and gives it a concrete historical form.⁴⁷

6. *Is the Canon Closed?*

One of the implications of the redemptive-historical perspective is the closed canon. Christ and the apostolic tradition constitute the eschatological fullness of divine revelation. The canon is therefore limited to those documents that the Church experienced as foundational to its own existence.

A sensitivity to the flow of redemptive history shows the correlation between redemptive activity and revelation, and negatively between inactivity and silence. For example, the rebuilding of the temple is the last event in redemptive history prior to Christ. Following this there is a low in the history of redemption for 400 years. With respect to revelation this is a period of silence. A new redemptive event then occurs. In Christ both revelation and redemption come to their climax and conclusion. Only the return of Christ is outstanding now (1 Thess.1:10). The redemption in Christ is authoritatively recorded (Gospels) and interpreted (Epistles). Thus the history of revelation for us is closed. This is connected to the apostolic institution (cf. John 14-16). It provided infallible revelatory attestation for Christ and his work.

Conclusion

Ridderbos has aptly illustrated the nature of the canonical process in the history of the ancient Church:

The Church has dealt with this situation as does one who knows and points to a certain person as father or mother. Such a knowledge rests not on demonstration but upon direct experience; it is most closely connected with one's own identity. In this and no other way must we picture the knowledge and 'decision' of the Church concerning the Canon.⁴⁸

In this way the history of the canon *a posteriori* supports the redemptive-historical *a priori*. Yet it remains a confession of faith that the canon of the New Testament corresponds exactly to Christ's canon. Their identity cannot be absolutely established by historical study. Historical evidence and "proofs" take us only so far. As in so many other areas there comes a point where it becomes a matter of faith. Our theological presuppositions and the historical evidence dovetail, but not perfectly. While our view of the canon does greater justice to the historical process than do, for example, the views of Harnack and the Roman Catholic theologians, we do not claim any infallible criteria of canonicity. In the end, with Ridderbos, we must acknowledge in faith that the empirical canon coincides with the canon of Christ. We can be absolutely certain and not just "practically" certain⁴⁹ about the status of the canon, but our certainty does not depend upon our study of historical data, but it comes from our faith in the sovereignty and providence of God.

⁴⁶ H. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963, 16.

⁴⁷ *Authority*, 40.

⁴⁸ "Canon of the New Testament", 200.

⁴⁹ This is the final conclusion reached by Dunbar in his article, "The Biblical Canon", 360. It is the inevitable result of his consistently evidentialist approach, which he shares with apologist John Warwick Montgomery. Although he has a high view of Scripture, his confidence in the contours of the canon falls short of absolute certainty.