

Reformed Theological Seminary

The Self-Attesting Nature of the New Testament Canon

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven...The Bible is the product of man, my dear. Not of God. The Bible did not fall magically from the clouds. Man created it as a historical record of tumultuous times, and it has evolved through countless translations, additions, and revisions. History has never had a definitive version of the book.¹

This quote from *The Da Vinci Code* encapsulates the attitude of many towards the canon and the canonization of the New Testament. It also casts doubt in the mind of those who do feel they have a definitive version of the Bible. Either way, twenty-five million people in forty-four different languages² are now asking which is the case: is the Bible a random gathering of dozens of books, a political gathering of propaganda documents, an irrelevant collection of books intended exclusively for first and second century believers, or is it the definitive, cohesive, and authoritative witness to the life of Jesus Christ and his church? Even without *The Da Vinci Code's* theory, it is easy to wonder why some books are included in the canon of scripture and some are not. It is also easy to wonder if the early church Fathers believed in the inspiration of the books in the canon, and if they did, how did they differentiate between those that they thought were inspired and others that they did not? Answering that question naturally leads to questions about how much influence the Fathers had in the process of determining the canon, and who or what made the collection finally authoritative? *The Da Vinci Code* argues that the gathering process was brought to a close and the canon was given authority by Constantine at the Council of Nicea. In doing this, Constantine removed any questionable gospels and deified a very human Jesus. On the other hand, to say that the early church Fathers chose the canon

¹ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 231.

² <http://www.cnn.com/2005/SHOWBIZ/books/03/09/davinci.code.ap/>

also leads one to wonder who or what is truly authoritative? Is it the Bible itself, or is it the Church that granted certain books canonical status?

Neither Constantine nor the Church canonizing the New Testament clears up all the questions, and as one can imagine, approaches such as these lead to frustration and varied historical conclusions. Some theologians, such as L.M. McDonald, find that historical conclusions are the best approach;³ this paper is going to respectfully disagree with them and stand in agreement with Robert Hall's statement: "For all their exegetical utility, the tools of historical criticism can be used in such a manner as to misplace Scripture's theological reference point with a historical one, freeing its normative meaning in an ancient world that does not bear upon today's church."⁴ In addition, historical investigations, though factually beneficial, are often biased in their conclusion (on all sides). For example, McDonald argues that the church began forming a canon as a result of Diocletian's burning of sacred Christian texts in 303 and Constantine's push for religious unity and conformity.⁵ However, one could just as easily argue that Diocletian's edict and Constantine's push proves that there was a growing canonical consciousness at the time. McDonald's argument is akin to a future researcher saying that the only reason a U.S. citizen got life insurance in 2001 was because of 9/11. Getting life insurance is something that people do every day, however. Two thousand years from now, people could look back and see that people purchased insurance in

³ L.M. McDonald, "The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon" *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 310, "Since the origin of the biblical canon is a historical question, it seems that the only defensible position is one that can be historically coherent."

⁴ Robert W. Wall, "The Significance of Canonical Perspective of the Church's Scripture," *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 529.

⁵ See L.M. McDonald, "Identifying Scripture and Canon in the Early Church: The Criteria Question," *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 416-439.

December 2001 and try to find a correlation between then two events when actually none exists.

In addition, many critics argue over early and late dates for the Gospels, both based on the same historical evidence. Many feel the evidence supports an early date, closer to the death of Jesus, arguing for the validity of the texts, while some critics argue for later dates, in order to establish that many of the texts are unreliable accounts of Jesus and his life. Both sides have the same historical evidence in front of them. In this same vein, the Jesus Seminar and the quest for the historical Jesus have cast doubts upon the validity of the contents of the New Testament itself. In fact, Robert Funk says,

The essential dogmas of the television evangelists, Fundamentalists, and many Evangelicals are museum exhibits: the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth, the blood atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the second coming. The decay of the old symbolic universe is so far advanced that many believers no longer find such dogmas interesting enough even to discuss.⁶

Historical conclusions alone lead critics to find reflections of themselves in the data more often than not. Therefore, this paper does not argue that historical evidences and their conclusions are useless, only that they often fall short in providing truly reliable conclusions.

The very tools (historical conclusions and the rational deductions that come from them) that many in the church have used to defend the canonical process have actually perpetuated doubt and criticism about the very thing that many sought to defend. The futility of such is delineated by Cornelius Van Til when he says,

We do not use candles or electric lights in order to discover whether the light and the energy of the sun exist. The reverse is the case. We have light in candles and electric light bulbs because of the light and energy of the sun. So we cannot

⁶ Robert W. Funk, "The Once and Future New Testament," *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, Hendrickson, 2002), 548.

subject the authoritative pronouncements of Scripture about reality to the scrutiny of reason because it is reason itself that learns its proper function from Scripture.⁷

If Scripture, and therefore the canon, are not rightly defended by their own inherent authority, then critics such as Robert Funk make valid and interesting points. He describes two factors that, as a result, have contributed to the rise of new debate about the canon. They are, “the steady erosion of canonical claims by the advance of historical-critical scholarship on the Bible,” and, “the collapse of ancient mythical frame of reference for the Christian gospel and creeds.”⁸ The church has often used historical claims to defend the church. Funk argues that historical scholarship has poked gaping holes in those historical claims. In addition, he feels the ancient mind frame of the church has not translated well to contemporary society. The concepts of virgin birth, and literal resurrection for example are not part of the modern mindset. There is an irony in the fact that the church looks to history to defend the canon yet holds to mystical elements in its religion. Therefore, because the church has often sought to defend the canon by the weight of historical evidences and claims, the canon has come under fire with the very means that the church used to defend it. In light of that reality, this paper posits that in terms of understanding the canonization process, there is only one solution that is satisfying. No one chose the New Testament canon; it chose itself.

For the purposes of this paper, the canonization of the New Testament will be explored by examining the subject of criteria, including the early Fathers’ perception of scripture, inspiration, and apostolicity, with an emphasis on the self-authenticating nature of the New Testament. By taking a self-authenticating approach, such language as

⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002, 2ed), 140.

⁸ Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament,” 541.

Eugene Ulrich uses when he talks of, “the historical development by which the oral and written literature...was handed on, revised, and transformed into the scriptures,”⁹ will be avoided. The scriptures were handed down. However, a revision or transformation from letter to scripture cannot be supported. Once that fact is established, this paper will offer a summary of the various lists and collections that led to the recognition in the late fourth century that the canon was closed.

⁹ Eugene Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon,” *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 33.

QUALIFICATION

Of note, source criticism, the study of the different components of a text with an emphasis on determining ideological strains and historical influences, says a great deal about the individual books within the canon. However, it is too large a topic for this study. Instead, this examination of the canonization process will look at the gathering of completed texts. As far as can be determined, early source criticism was not a part of the canonization process, and, even if there were some questions about origin or variations in the texts that were considered, these questions did not play a significant role. Whether there was a *Q*, or whether Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark, are not in question here. As far as can be determined, they were not a part of the discussion of the Church Fathers and therefore will not play a part in this discussion. According to the research of Bruce Metzger of Princeton, “the question of the canonicity of a document apparently did not arise in connection with discussion of variant readings.”¹⁰ It seems that if there were variations within a certain text, for example the long ending of Mark, it did not invalidate the text for possible inclusion within the canon. Again, Metzger says, “It appears that the question of canonicity pertains to the document *qua* document, and not to one particular form or version of that document.”¹¹ As a result then, source criticism is out of bounds in terms of this discussion because it was assumed that the original writing was Scripture, no matter what corruptions may have taken place in some manuscripts.

¹⁰ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 269.

¹¹ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 270.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

Pressing forward, there are a few questions that need to be answered: what is *canon*, what is the etymology of its use, and why is it used to refer to the New Testament's documents?

Etymologically, canon is a Semitic loanword that originally meant "reed" but came to mean "measuring reed" and hence "rule" or "standard" or "norm." In the course of time it came to have the purely formal sense of "list" or "table." In ecclesiastical usage during the first three centuries, it referred to the normative doctrinal and ethical content of Christian faith. By the fourth century it came to refer to the list of books that constitute the Old and New Testaments. It is the latter sense that predominates today: the "canon" has come to refer to the closed collection of documents that constitute authoritative Scriptures.¹²

According to F.F. Bruce, Origen used canon in such a way as to mean, "rule of faith,"¹³ or, "the standard by which we are to measure and evaluate everything that may be offered to us as an article of belief."¹⁴ In this sense, canon refers to the authoritative rules by which faith is to be lived out or practiced as mentioned above.¹⁵ However, the first formal use of canon referring to the body of scripture is found in Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter letter of 367.¹⁶ Interestingly enough, that is also the first place that recorded the present twenty-seven books of the New Testament as canonical.

¹² D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 487.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *The Book and the Parchments* (Westwood: Revell, 1963), 95.

¹⁴ Bruce, *The Book and the Parchments*, 95.

¹⁵ Some take a more sociological definition of canon. James Sanders uses, "a community's paradigm for how to continue the dialogue in ever changing socio-political contexts." James A. Sanders, "The Issue of Closure in the Canonical Process," *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 262.

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 17.

CHAPTER TWO

POSITION

This being understood, this paper, in opposition to Dan Brown, F.F. Bruce, and many others, does not posit that the church had standardized criteria by which it chose or did not choose certain books, nor does it posit that the church decided to form a canon in response to heretical pressures, such as Gnosticism or the Marcionite canon. Though the church affirmed certain books, and those books arose in such a time as to combat heresy (or at least heresy's predecessors), that does not mean that the church was the shaper of the canon. If the point that the church shaped the canon is conceded (or can be proven), it leads to a devaluation of scripture because there very well may have been valid books not considered because they did not address the issues of the church at that time. The understandable conclusion then would be McDonald's. He says, "For whatever reasons, the literature that best suited the needs of the church is the literature that survived in its traditions and became of [sic] a part of its sacred scriptures."¹⁷ Essentially, McDonald's and Funk's argument is that whatever was utilitarian stayed, whatever was not, was jettisoned.¹⁸ However, for this hypothesis to be true, it would be necessary to prove that the books existed in a limbo state where people did not consider them to be scripture, but this runs counter to the understanding that as soon as some books were written, they were already considered authoritative. For example, *II Peter* refers to Paul's writings as γραφάς "scripture." This is the same word used by Jesus in Matthew 26 when he speaks of the Old Testament "scriptures" being fulfilled. B.B. Warfield notes, "thus the apostle

¹⁷ McDonald, *Formation*, 310.

¹⁸ Clear arguments could be made as to whether several N.T. books were utilitarian at all: James, Jude, Philemon, etc. See C.E. Hill, "Lectures on the Canon of the New Testament" from Hebrews through Revelation, course taught at RTS, 24.

Peter...speaks of Paul's numerous letters not in contrast with the Scriptures, but as among the Scriptures and in contrast with the other scriptures (II Pet.iii.16) – that is, of course, those of the Old Testament.”¹⁹ Geoffrey Mark Hahneman argues, contrary to my prior point, that, “whereas the concept of canon presupposes the existence of scriptures, the concept of scripture does not necessarily imply the notion of canon. Thus it is entirely possible to possess scriptures without having a canon, and this was in fact the situation in the first few centuries of the Christian church.”²⁰ Hahneman would see Peter's calling Paul's writings scripture as no indicator of canonical consciousness. His explanation lies in the fact that *canon* was not used, per se, until centuries later, so Peter was merely recognizing authority. Respectfully, I think Hahneman has made an oversimplification. Though there are some questions about the dates of the closure of the Old Testament canon, it is generally agreed what scriptures the Apostles knew as canon. With that in mind, it makes sense that if Peter was to call any other writings *scripture* he is recognizing the opening and expanding of the canon. To open the canon, naturally leads to questions about its closure.

Therefore, the idea of authoritative scriptures was not a new one to the church. They already bore witness to a canon or body of scriptures that were authoritative. Jesus himself referred to twenty-three of the thirty-six books of the Hebrew Bible²¹ (Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles being counted as three books, not six), as observed in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus' allusions or references included all the books of the Law, most of the

¹⁹ B.B. Warfield, “Appendix II, The Canon of the New Testament: How and When Formed,” in *Revelation and Inspiration* (vol. 1 of *The Complete Works of B.B. Warfield*; Grand Rapids: Baker House, 2000), 452.

²⁰ Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, “The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament Canon,” *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 405.

²¹ See the tabulation in R.T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1971), 259-263.

Prophets, and some of the writings. The presence of an Old Testament canon can also be corroborated by examining the Dead Sea Scrolls. Of the two hundred Bible manuscripts identified, only Habakkuk, Esther, and Nehemiah are missing. Habakkuk was probably present at Qumran (a lengthy commentary is devoted to it), Ezra's presence argues for Nehemiah's, and Esther is probably absent for deliberate reasons.²² In addition to Jesus' quoting of the Old Testament, he also approached his use of Scripture in a unique way that is helpful for our understanding of the attitude of the day towards scripture and inspiration. Evans says,

Jesus also seems to have quoted scripture freely, partly due to the pluriform nature of scripture in his day and partly because of his paraphrasing, allusive, and conflating style. Jesus' allusive quotation of scripture did not always distinguish text from interpretation; the two seem to blend together. What may in part account for this approach to scripture was Jesus' "spirit-filled" orientation, and his experience that the Spirit of God that had inspired scripture was again acting powerfully to fulfill scripture and adapt it, as it were, to the circumstances and effects of Jesus' ministry. The canon of scripture for Jesus, then remained open, for God's revealing work was not yet complete.²³

Jesus' use of scripture engendered an attitude in his disciples that God was speaking presently and would continue to speak through them. Jesus spoke as if God was speaking through his own words, and it is not a stretch for the carriers of Jesus' message, his disciples, to then feel that their message was authoritative and inspired. It is not a leap of logic, therefore, to assume that the writings surrounding them might be accepted at the outset as authoritative and inspired.

Thus, the early church, "inherited...from the Jewish church, along with the thing itself, the Jewish scriptures, or the Canon of the Old Testament itself."²⁴ With this

²² See the helpful discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Craig A. Evans, "The Scriptures of Jesus and His Earliest Followers," *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 185-195.

²³ Evans, "The Scriptures of Jesus," 195.

²⁴ Warfield, "The Canon of the New Testament," 451.

canonical, authoritative, scriptural mindset, recognizing that Peter²⁵ referenced Paul's writings as Scriptures helps us to understand that the early church was already recognizing certain writings as equal in authoritative weight as the Jewish Old Testament: "The early Christians did not, then, first form a rival canon of new books which came only gradually to be accounted as of equal divinity and authority with the old books; they received new book after new book from the apostolical circle, as equally Scripture with the old books."²⁶ Critics might argue that Warfield's claim was simply not the case in light of the lack of references to the New Testament works as scripture and the church Fathers' obvious use of other books that were later seen as spurious. These issues will be dealt with under the issue of the self-authenticating nature of canon.

²⁵ There is obvious debate about the authorship of *2 Peter*. It is not the place of this work to debate whether the work is pseudopigraphical or not. This paper references *2 Peter* as a canonical work referencing another canonical author.

²⁶ Warfield, "The Canon of the New Testament," 452-453.

CHAPTER THREE

EARLY INFLUENCES

But, what of the negative external pressures such as heretical thought and pseudo-canons? Did the canon not come together to combat heresies such as Gnosticism? Simply described, Gnostic thought was, “characterized by the assertion that elect souls, being divine sparks temporarily imprisoned physical bodies as a result of a precosmic catastrophe, can obtain salvation by means of a special gnosis (knowledge) of their origin and destiny.”²⁷ Gnosticism soon became the chief opponent to orthodoxy in the early church. Some would argue, though not conclusively, that the early battle against Gnosticism, or at least its origins, is seen in such New Testament works as *Colossians*, *Titus* and *2 Timothy* as each argues against forms of higher knowledge.

With that in mind, did the early Fathers fight this battle by forming a canon of scripture against such teaching? Metzger explores the answer to that question in the discovery of the *Nag Hammadi* writings on the Nile in Egypt in the mid-1940’s. The *Nag Hammadi* library is essentially Gnostic in nature, though it does contain some non-Gnostic works. Dating from around 400 AD, it contains fifty or so treatises delineating Gnosticism.²⁸ Some of its Gnostic Gospels deal with the period of time between the resurrection and the ascension of Christ, something the four Gospels do not speak much of at all. The Gnostics also produced books that spoke of the supposed secret things taught by Jesus. Anybody could claim to have such a secret, and somehow the Church had to decide how to discern between the authoritative and the heretical. Metzger puts forth that the church countered secret teachings by accepting nothing that did not keep in

²⁷ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 76.

²⁸ For a detailed explanation of many of the books within the *Nag Hammadi*, see Pheme Perkins, “Gnosticism and the Christian Bible,” *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 355-371.

the spirit of known apostolic teaching. However, this idea of the church countering Gnosticism with scripture, or even whether the New Testament addresses Gnosticism at all, is not clear-cut to scholars. Harry Gamble appeals,

As useful as this appeal may have been, it does not show that the canon was created with this end in view, or even that it was entirely serviceable for this purpose. While Gnostic groups did produce their own literature, they also made full and free use of those early Christian writings which were in general esteem. The difference between Gnostic Christianity and the church at large lay less to appeals to different writings than in different hermeneutical approaches in much of the same literature.²⁹

In summary, yes, Gnostics wrote their own literature. Early Christianity clearly produced their own literature, and it makes sense that those writings would address the heretical issues of the day. However, it is also true that Gnosticism borrowed freely from those early Christian writings. However, the claim that the gathering and canonization process of the early church was spurred on simply to fight heresy is unsubstantiated. Gamble, at least, thinks that the difference between Gnosticism and Christianity was more a matter of how they approached their scriptures and not what scriptures they approached. If this is true, it hurts the argument of many that the church was seeking to create or collect scripture to counter other canons.

It is noteworthy that the definition of heresy is not even agreed upon. Elaine Pagels, a proponent of the church's anti-heresy agenda, says, "we need to consider what constitutes heresy not so much, as we have traditionally, in terms of people holding different beliefs and ideas, but in terms of people involved in different forms of practice, both hermeneutical and ritual."³⁰ With disagreements over what heresy is, or even what

²⁹ Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 63.

³⁰ Elaine Pagels, "Irenaeus, The Canon of Truth, and the *Gospel of John*," *VC LVI* (2002): 339-371.

the practice of heresy looked like, one must be careful if the primary reasoning for the formation of the canon is to fight false belief and practice. That is Dan Brown's, as well as McDonald's and Gamble's, argument and it comes precariously close to saying that the church did have an agenda. Now, many feel quite comfortable with this agenda, but once an agenda is established, the question is raised as to whether the agenda is right, or wrong, God's or man's.

CHAPTER FOUR

“CANON” FORMING

Without a doubt, Gnosticism was a true threat, but not the only heresy of the time. In fact, some heresies even included canon-forming. Take the activities of Marcion for example. What is known of him is spotty at best, and the bulk of our knowledge of him comes from Tertullian and Epiphanius, both of whom sought to refute him. Taking that into account, what can be surmised is that Marcion’s thinking was influenced heavily by a Syrian dualism that pitted the teachings of Jesus against those of the Old Testament, so he was decidedly anti-law and pro-Paul. With this umbrella theology in mind, he put together a list of works that he felt were authoritative. Thus, his list rejected the Old Testament, accepted only one Gospel, a heavily edited version of *Luke*, and included his edition of ten letters of Paul, excluding the Pastorals. Considering the timeframe in which he wrote, and the evidence of his canon being completed well before many New Testament canon collections, one might wonder whether the church was simply reacting against Marcion by forming their own canon. Several scholars feel this way. John Knox even goes so far as to say, “Marcion is primarily responsible for the idea of the New Testament.”³¹ William Abraham makes the point saying, “it (Marcionite canon) paved the way for construing the additional material added to the Jewish Scriptures as the New Testament...the church simply fought fire with fire.”³² It might be giving him too much credit to say that the idea of a Christian Bible is the work of Marcion.

³¹ John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), 31.

³² William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology from the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 34.

It is, at least, an oversimplification. In examining the canon, all must be reminded that recognition of certain books and gathering of documents were well underway during the time of Marcion. As Warfield says,

Let it suffice to say that, from the evidence of the fragments which alone have been preserved to us of the Christian writings of that very early time, it appears that from the beginning of the second century (and that is from the end of the apostolic age) a collection (Ignatius, II Clement) of “New Books” (Ignatius), called the “Gospel and Apostles” (Ignatius, Marcion) was already a part of the “Oracles” of God (Polycarp, Papias, II Clement), or “Scriptures” (I Tim., II Pet., Barn., Polycarp, II Clement), or the “Holy Books” or “Bible” (Testt. XII.Patt).³³

However, the church’s collecting books was a conscious effort to fight the heresies of Marcion and Gnosticism; the church’s collecting was a recognition that certain books were inherently authoritative. This is illustrated in the fact that Marcion’s canon was, “in declared opposition to the holy scriptures of the church from which he had separated; it was in opposition to his criticism that the church in its turn first became rightly conscious of its heritage of apostolic writings.”³⁴ T. von Zahn argues that Marcion created a canon in response to the one that was already growing. This point is crucial because if the only reason there is a New Testament canon today was that the church had to fight fire with fire and counteract heretical teaching, then the New Testament becomes dangerously close to the contrived propaganda that critics such as Dan Brown say it is.

³³ Warfield, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 454.

³⁴ T. von Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (trans. J. Trout; Erlangen: Leipzig, 1888), 144.

CHAPTER FIVE

CRITERIA

Bruce's Criteria

As mentioned before, scriptures accepted catholically were collected early on after the period of apostolic witness. Bruce says, “until the sixties of the first century AD the need for written Gospels does not appear to have risen. As long as the eye-witnesses...were alive to tell the tale, it was not necessary to have a formal written record.”³⁵ But, gradually the Apostles and eyewitnesses began to pass away and the need for preserving and establishing continuity began to exert its influence. The fact that the whole church eventually came to recognize the same twenty-seven books is amazing since there was no contrived effort church-wide. Dunbar explains that, “All that the several churches through the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character.”³⁶ The church merely witnessed to the authority that they recognized in certain books. They did not begin by, “making formal declarations about what was and was not canonical or by erecting specific criteria of canonicity.”³⁷ However, many esteemed scholars feel there were such criteria. Were there, and what does that mean for the authority of the canon? Nowhere among the writings of the early Fathers is there such a template to explain the canonization process. Thus, Gamble, who does attempt to qualify a group of criteria, issues this caution. He says, “Because these principles were not invoked with great rigor or consistency, it is difficult to assess their actual effects on

³⁵ Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 106.

³⁶ David G. Dunbar, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 317.

³⁷ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing company, 1988), 40-41.

the history of the canon, and there is disagreements today about the meaning or importance of the so-called criteria of canonicity.”³⁸ F.F. Bruce, however, in *The Canon and Scripture*, lays out the criteria that he felt best represents that which the early fathers used to validate or invalidate certain books. Taking these into account, there is helpful information gained by examining his list. Each criterion offers a quality that the early fathers very well may have recognized in the canon, however, the shortfalls of Bruce’s approach will be highlighted individually as discussed.

The first was apostolic authority. As Bruce says, “Since Jesus himself left nothing in writing, the most authoritative writings available to the church were those which came from his Apostles.”³⁹ Any writings of an Apostle were to be respected, and in fact, the writings of the Apostles took on a weight long before canonization. The church Fathers in the generation after the Apostles clearly knew that their own writings were not as authoritative. By some instinct, “each one of those teachers who stood nearest to the writers of the New Testament contrasted his writings with theirs, and definitely placed himself on a lower level.”⁴⁰ However much differentiation existed for apostolic writings, it did not exclude non-apostolic writings. The author of the Muratorian Canon assumes that, “the personal qualification of the authors as eyewitnesses or as careful historians,”⁴¹ be considered. These historians were considered if they had close association with the Apostles. For example, some church Fathers, for instance Papias, believed that Mark set down Peter’s account of Jesus and his life. Also, membership in the holy family gave authors apostolic authority in their writings as well.

³⁸ Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 67.

³⁹ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 256.

⁴⁰ Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, (New York: Macmillan, 1896), 57.

⁴¹ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 253.

James was Jesus' brother, and Paul in Gal. 1:19 includes him among the apostles. Jude accounts himself as a servant to Jesus and a brother to James.

But clearly, there are problems with this argument. There is clear that the writings of the New Testament were for the most by the Apostles. However, neither Mark, Luke, James, nor Jude were apostles yet their writings are a part of the canon. To open the criterion up to those even within the apostolic circle provides candidacy for a myriad of associates. And as in the case of many rejected gospels and epistles (see the chart below), the apostolic circle was actually very narrow. In addition, if apostolic authorship grants canonicity, then what would happen if the letter Paul wrote between 1 and 2 Corinthians were discovered? Would it be added? And if being closely associated with an apostle meant that your book could be accepted, what of the many gospels and letters attributed to Apostles and their close associates? To understand the breadth of that question, consider the number of books included in this partial list of "apostolic" writings:

1. Gospels: *Protoevangelium of James, Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Nicodemus, Gospel of the Nazoreans, Gospel of the Ebionites, Gospel of the Hebrews, Gospel of the Egyptians, Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Mary.*
2. Acts: *Acts of John, Acts of Peter, Acts of Paul, Acts of Andrew, Acts of Thomas, Acts of Andrew and Matthias, Acts of Philip, Acts of Thaddaeus, Acts of Peter and Paul, Acts of Peter and Andrew, Martyrdom of Matthew, Slavonic Acts of Peter, Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles.*
3. Epistles: *Third Corinthians, Epistle to the Laodiceans, Letters of Paul and Seneca, Letters of Jesus and Abgar, Letter of Lentulus, Epistle of Titus.*
4. Apocalypses: *Apocalypse of Peter, Coptic Apocalypse of Paul, First Apocalypse of James, Second Apocalypse of James, Apocryphon of John, Sophia of Jesus Christ, Letter of Peter to Philip, Apocalypse of Mary.*⁴²

⁴² McDonald, "Identifying Scripture," 427. Of note, very few scholars consider these books to have been written by the Apostles. However, understanding the number of books attributed to them helps one to understand that the claim of authorship by an Apostle could not have been enough to bring a book into the canon. However, the sheer number of books attributed to the Apostles does show who the imitators thought needed to have written them.

The Apostles, and their close associates *were* the primary writers of scripture.⁴³

However, simply being an Apostle is not all that makes them canonical, and that is the weakness of Bruce's argument. His criteria of apostolic authority speaks narrowly to the fact that coming from the apostolic circle is what makes a book canonical. What is more outstanding is not the author's intimacy with Jesus and his followers, but the realization that their writings were inspired by God.⁴⁴ Inspiration brings up two issues. One is the issue of apostolic commissions and the other is canonical consciousness, which will be discussed later.

There are several issues bound up in the apostolic commission. Meredith Kline argues well for the anticipation of a New Testament documentary expression⁴⁵ and C.E. Hill supports this in his argument for a prophetic foundation in the Gospel message.⁴⁶ These lay a foundation for Jesus' commission to the disciples. Herman Ridderbos says, "From the very beginning of his entry Jesus shared his own power (exoesia) with others in order to give to this authority a visible and tangible form upon which the church on earth might be established and extended."⁴⁷ By doing this,

⁴³ McDonald argues, "Nearly all biblical literature was produced anonymously." "Identifying Scripture," 419. However, I find this statement to be a pejorative statement. It assumes that the early Christians who attributed apostolic authorship to a book were not smart enough to determine who wrote what. Though there questions about certain books, the majority of Paul's writings were not in dispute.

⁴⁴ Though this claim is made by the scripture writers of other religions (Joseph Smith, Mohammed), the NT is unique in that it is a body of scriptures written by various authors that make this claim. Its lasting endurance and impact must be taken into account. As William Temple says, "The spiritual authority of revelation depends wholly upon the spiritual quality of what is revealed." William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 347.

⁴⁵ Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids, 1963); *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, second ed. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998).

⁴⁶ Hill, "Lectures on the Canon", 9, "According to the NT, the prophets predicted not only a Messiah, but a message of the Messiah; not only a Redeemer and his redemption, but also the message of redemption... There is thus a substantial prophetic foundation for the apostolic mission and the message it proclaimed. It was pre-authorized by Scripture even before the arrival of Jesus."

⁴⁷ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 14.

The one who has such power of attorney is called a Shaliach (apostle). The uniqueness of this relationship is pregnantly expressed by the notion that the Shaliach (apostle) of a man, is as the man himself. In this sense, anyone who receives an apostle receives the person who has sent him. Jesus applied this to his apostles in the most formal way, when he said, “he that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me” (Matt. 10:40; cf. John 13:20). And in another place: “as the Father hath sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21). The apostles are thus uniquely empowered to represent Christ. In an entirely unique and exclusive sense Jesus entrusted the gospel of the kingdom to them.⁴⁸

This approach is revolutionary. The arguments of whether the books are conspiracy documents or whether we have old enough copies pass away. One must move beyond the argument of dating and fragments and into the mind of Jesus. If Jesus, in the Hebrew tradition, entrusted his disciples with a commissioned message, then discrediting the books of the New Testament necessarily must become an issue of imputing conspiratorial motive to the apostles. Otherwise, one must wonder why the apostles would seek to do anything other than faithfully record the message of Jesus. So the foundation for inspiration of the New Testament is not merely that many of the books were written by apostles or their close associates, but that their writing was both a by-product of the message of the Gospel and a function of the work of Jesus, himself. The fact that their writings were a function of the Gospel itself is more of an aspect of apostolicity than mere association with Jesus. This removes the criteria question away from Jesus’ close associates and forces critics to begin asking questions about Jesus’ motive and the expectations he had for his message. Here is where the claim of inspiration found in the New Testament is different than the writings of Islam or of Mormonism. Jesus commissioned a group of men, not a single man, to authoritatively take his message into

⁴⁸ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 15.

the world (Matthew 28:16-20). This message was given the authenticating stamp of the sender himself and the messengers were given the right to proclaim it.

Another of Bruce's criteria was antiquity. This is the idea that writings produced after the era other than the Apostles could not be included. It was seen as necessary for a book to be written within the lifetime of the Apostles to be seen as credible according to Bruce's argument. Anything written beyond that period was in danger of possessing a corrupted message and therefore could not be fully trusted. Therefore, antiquity and apostolicity are closely related. The passage of time might allow for some deviation from the message of Jesus, his Apostles, and their immediate company.

One such book that was doubted because of the issue of antiquity was the *Shepherd of Hermas*. During its consideration for the Muratorian Canon, it was rejected because it was too recent of a work at that time. The book was written when Pius was bishop of Rome between 138-161 AD. According to Bruce, "its recency is the main argument against acknowledging it as a biblical document...if the door had been opened for the admission of second-century prophecies, there would be many strange claimants for inclusion."⁴⁹ Bruce then feels that as Christianity spread further and more and more time separated the church and Jesus' message, less and less consideration for canonicity was given to those documents that were separated by both time and space from Jesus.

Antiquity of a document may have been considered by the early Fathers as they wondered whether or not a book was true, but the time a book was written cannot be the only reason for its authority. If that was the case, *Revelation*, which even the most conservative of scholars think was written late in the first century, over sixty years after

⁴⁹ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 166. Bruce fails to mention that the first century provided some strange documents for inclusion as well.

Jesus, would be excluded. McDonald wisely cautions by saying, “it is unwise to place too much emphasis on such a changing and imprecise criterion, given the variety of opinion among New Testament scholars on the dating of the New Testament writings.”⁵⁰ In addition, if antiquity is a factor, then scholars have no choice but to believe that the books of the New Testament existed for a period of time when they were not holy, but their proximity to the time of Christ aided them in becoming sacred. It also assumes that the question surrounding these books didn’t take place until the late second century. If this were the case then, “the problem of the history of the canon would then be the question as to how the New Testament books became Holy books.”⁵¹ Antiquity may be a quality of the books in the canon, but that does not make it a qualification for inclusion in the canon. Ultimately, the danger of the antiquity argument is that it goes beyond the book’s inherent authority and looks for some authority outside itself, which we will find is the weakness in most criteria arguments.

Another of Bruce’s criteria for canonicity was orthodoxy. The books that were considered for the canon must agree with, “the faith set forth in the undoubted apostolic writings and maintained in the churches which had been founded by the Apostles.”⁵² Essentially, if those books agreed with the rule of faith set forth by Jesus and his Apostles, they were accepted. If not, they were not. It makes sense that the books that represent Jesus and his message would be consistent with the faith he put forth.

However, this is the premise of the skepticism behind *The Da Vinci Code*. It states that more than 80 gospels were considered for the Bible,⁵³ which by the way is not

⁵⁰ McDonald, “Identifying Scripture,” 432.

⁵¹ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 25.

⁵² Bruce, *The Canon of the Scriptures*, 260.

⁵³ Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 231.

substantiated by any evidence. Brown's premise is that the Church specifically rejected books that might have painted a fair but different version of Jesus in order to protect the church's conception of Jesus. Is that the case? Consider the argument for *The Gospel of Peter*. This Gospel was widely read in the church of Rhossus, but as the Bishop Serapion discovered that the book described Jesus' crucifixion without suffering (a Docetic belief), he discouraged it from use in worship, seeing it as out of accord with the teaching of the other Gospel accounts. In addition, the gospel describes the divine power leaving the physical frame on the cross. The letter Serapion wrote states, "for our part brethren, we receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ; but as men of experience, we reject the writings falsely inscribed with their names, since we know that such were not handed down to us."⁵⁴ Simply put, the book was rejected because it taught a different gospel, and Serapion clearly felt that Peter's name had been added to the account to garner acceptance. It was thus not part of the apostolic documents handed down to him. But does that mean that the *Gospel of Peter* is not in the canon due to one lone Bishop? And if so, how do we trust that he made the right decision, and who gave him the right to make such a decision for all the church?

Clearly, books were read other than the twenty-seven, so how was it decided that those books would not be included? The answer is more complex than just saying that those that were orthodox were kept and those that were not were rejected. The answer is that, "we cannot distinguish the canon correctly, except in the light of Christ, who is not only the content of the canon, but also its great presupposition. Christ not only provides salvation, He also provides trustworthy communication about that salvation."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Quoted by Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* VI. Xiii. 3.

⁵⁵ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 43.

Therefore, the true and faithful witness of Christ endures because it is the witness of Christ, not because it was carefully chosen by Bishops as faithful to the orthodoxy of the churches. This may oversimplify my argument as much as the one that claims that orthodoxy was the primary criterion. Both begin with presuppositions, so the question is really a matter of which is correct. To argue criteria means to argue the interpretation of historical evidences, which as illustrated above, leads to multiple conclusions. To argue that the books of the canon are the trustworthy communication of the Christ and therefore they validate themselves leads to only one conclusion: we have the correct canon.

One final note on orthodoxy: not everything that was orthodox was canonized. By reading many writings of the early church, one can easily find documents that are orthodox in nature. However, they are not part of our New Testament canon. For example, if a document from the first century was discovered, and within it were the words, “Jesus is Lord,” that would be a completely orthodox and trustworthy statement that also met the criterion of antiquity and catholicity. But my mere stating of orthodox assertions during that time period would not prove my words to be scripture or inspired. Bruce’s argument here falls apart because he creates a category that is too broad and therefore leaves too much doubt about which documents were “chosen” and which were not.

Another criterion was catholicity. As Bruce says, “a work which enjoyed local recognition was not likely to be acknowledged as part of the canon of the catholic church. On the other hand, a work which was acknowledged by the greater part of the catholic church would probably receive universal recognition sooner or later.”⁵⁶ It makes sense that the canon is full of books that the majority of Christians accepted. However, most of

⁵⁶ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 261.

the books of the New Testament were written to specific groups addressing specific issues. Though this does not discount those works for inclusion in the canon, it does not support the case that catholicity was a criterion of the early church.

Though books that were accepted by a greater part of the catholic church are a part of the canon, this of course begs the question whether the books of the New Testament were authoritative in their own right or because the church ascribed to them authority. Metzger feels the former.

The distinction between the New Testament writings and later ecclesiastical literature is not based upon arbitrary fact; it has historical reasons. The generations following the apostles bore witness to the effect that certain writings had on their faith and life. The self-authenticating witness of the word testified to the divine origin of the gospel that had brought the Church into being.⁵⁷

It appears that as the new church continued to grow and be shaped as a community, the scriptures they interacted with, and specifically resonated with, survived as authoritative. Those that survived were not just those that had proven themselves effective in their lives, but also those that testified specifically to the testimony of Jesus and His disciples. In this way, the scriptures authenticated themselves.

A nagging thought remains: what if there was an authoritative testimony of apostolic witness, but it never “caught on” and was thus excluded? Metzger counters, “instead of suggesting that certain books were accidentally included and others were accidentally excluded from the New Testament canon – whether the exclusion be defined in terms of the activity of individuals, or synods, or councils – it is more accurate to say that certain books excluded themselves from the canon.”⁵⁸ In the spirit of Ridderbos,

⁵⁷ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 286.

⁵⁸ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 286.

thinking that the early Church chose some books as authoritative and others as not, is like asking a child why he chose his mom and dad to be his parents.

The final element of Bruce's criteria was inspiration. This, of course, is the most difficult criterion to discern objectively, yet for the early Fathers, inspiration appears indispensable. Without it, "the appeal to Scripture as the foundation of all theology becomes entirely arbitrary."⁵⁹ As Bruce says, "these works were accepted, first as authoritative and then as canonical scripture, because they were recognized to be trustworthy witnesses to the saving events."⁶⁰ In the case of some, the books were not immediately recognized as apostolic or inspired, but as seen above, they proved themselves so in the eyes of the Fathers by being true, consistent, and authoritative.

But again, the question must be asked, who determines inspiration? The answer again, is not a gathering of church Fathers but Christ himself. "Christ establishes the canon in the ascertainable character of apostolic preaching and in the legibility of apostolic writings, in the preservation of the apostolic witness and doctrine."⁶¹ The books proved themselves to be inspired or not. But as Ridderbos says,

Such historical conditions, however, no matter how reasonable they seem to us, are not the basis for recognition of the canon, and in actuality, they never have been. What caused the church to accept the central components of the canon as holy and canonical was the certainty that those particular books had been received from the hand of the Lord himself.⁶²

Because the issue of inspiration is so important, it is necessary that to explore it in greater detail. Bruce is right when he says that all the books within the canon are inspired.

⁵⁹ Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, 148.

⁶⁰ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 266.

⁶¹ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 37.

⁶² Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 43.

However, the church did not have any organized effort to debate whether individual books were inspirational and therefore worthy of inclusion in the canon.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCEPT OF INSPIRATION

After considering Bruce's idea of criteria, it is necessary to give the idea of inspiration some consideration. It is posited that the early Church did not choose inspired books but that the inspired books distinguished themselves. However, even this raises more questions. Did the Fathers restrict inspiration to individual documents? Did they ascribe it to the entire document or portions? To the author?

A careful reading of the early Fathers shows that the concept of inspiration was a broad one. Metzger claims, "the inspiration they ascribe of the Scriptures was only one facet of the inspiring activity of the Holy Spirit in many aspects of the Church's life."⁶³ He refers to the author of the Epistle of Diognetus who claims inspiration and to a writing from Eusebius that attributes inspiration to a sermon from Emperor Constantine. In addition, Augustine felt Jerome, bishop of Hippo, was favored with divine grace. Paul the Deacon felt the Holy Spirit explained the mysteries of scripture to Gregory the Great. Some insight is gained by looking at what was considered non-inspired. The early fathers would use the term "non-inspired" for heretical writings, not just writings that were outside the canon. So it was possible for a writing to be orthodox in nature yet not be inspired, but it was not called non-inspired. That was reserved for the works of heresy. As one can see, thinking that inspiration was a determining criterion of the early church raises more questions than answers. That does not mean the canon is not inspired, but only that inspiration was not a criterion in the way that many writers think it was.

⁶³ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 255. The following references to inspired writings can be found in the chapter "Inspiration and the Canon", 254-257.

One avenue for better understanding the concept of inspiration and the canon are the writings of Justin. Justin wrote in the second century and used New Testament writings to support Christian teachings and worship. Critic McDonald includes him among the authors that must be taken into account if one wants to seriously discuss the origin of the canon.⁶⁴ Justin's use of the Gospels has aroused much debate,⁶⁵ however, there are lessons on inspiration to be gained from his use of the scriptures. Hill makes a case that Justin's purpose was to create an apologetic writing and therefore it was unnecessary for him, to name and defend all of his specifically Christian authorities.⁶⁶ With that established, Hill posits that one must consider Justin's comments about the reputed authors of the New Testament documents. He says, "given our observations about the purpose of Justin's apologetic writings, this does not rule out the possibility of some theory of inspiration being presupposed without formal argumentation."⁶⁷ Essentially, just because Justin is writing in defense of the Christian faith, that does not rule out that the possibility that he would have something to say about inspiration, which has the been the argument against his shedding light on canon development. What Justin does is speak of the apostolate in high regard. Hill describes it in this way,

Given Justin's exalted view of the importance of Jesus' apostles, it is only natural, I would argue, to presume that any writing which he believed was apostolic, which belonged to the discharge of that prophetic assignment to teach the doctrine of Christ to the nations, Justin would have invested with a very high degree of authority. Neither is there any reason, a priori, to think that this would be

⁶⁴ McDonald, "Appendix B: Primary Sources of the New Testament Canon," *Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 583.

⁶⁵ See Hill, C.E. "Justin and the New Testament Writings," in E. A. Livingstone, ed., *Studia Patristica XXX* (1997) 42-48. Hill challenges the critique that Justin held no Christian writing as scriptural and that he held only the words of Jesus as inspiration and not the accounts of the Gospels.

⁶⁶ Hill, "Justin and the New Testament Writings," 45.

⁶⁷ Hill, "Justin and the New Testament Writings," 46.

restricted to the apostolic Memoirs of Jesus' life and teaching, and not apply to other 'apostolic' documents.⁶⁸

Hill argues that Justin's view of Jesus and his apostles is such that one sees that he felt the writings of the New Testament that he encountered were inspired. Justin does not come across as a man with a manipulative agenda. Therefore I think it is wise to avoid such skeptical viewpoints as Funk's. He says,

To claim that the New Testament documents were both orthodox and inspired is to say the same thing. A book was thought to be inspired if it were orthodox, and orthodox if it were inspired. The employment of these two criteria is a tactical ploy: define as canonical what the bishops have decided as orthodox and declare it to be inspired at the same time; eliminate everything that does not fit the orthodox mold and you produce an impregnable circle.⁶⁹

Funk is correct to say that when something is inspired it creates an impregnable circle if one makes inspiration as narrow a category as he does. However, the point is that the scriptures of the canon are inspired. Therefore, it is the scriptures and not the defenders of the canon that create the impregnable circles. If our defense of the canon is anything other than the individual book's inherent inspiration and self-authenticating nature, then we create an improper impregnable circle that excludes true discussion and even true value and thus our defense rightly deserves the derision that Funk and others give to defenders of the canon.

This is something of which the writers of the New Testament were aware. Both 1 John 1:6 and Revelation 1:1-2 present themselves as inspired and therefore authoritative from God. It is that God delivers the message and not the human being who delivers it that makes a book authoritative and therefore canonical. It must be noted that many do not feel that there is an overwhelming canonical consciousness within the New

⁶⁸ Hill, "Justin and the New Testament Writings," 48.

⁶⁹ Funk, "The Once and Future New Testament," 543.

Testament. And they are right in that if there is not one, then the argument for the self-authenticating nature of the canon is weakened.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CANONICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Considering inspiration raises several questions. Did the writers of scripture have a canonical consciousness? Did they know they were writing scripture and did those reading their writings know they were reading scripture?⁷⁰ If they did not and one argues that the scriptures testify to their own authority, then one must believe that the scriptures are not inherently inspired because the writers did not recognize it as they wrote. The question may be, “how would we know?” Robert Kraft proposes an interesting argument in favor of canonical consciousness that has merit. He proposes that the introduction, or at least the proliferation, of the codex enabled canonical consciousness.⁷¹ He says, “from this period we get references to officially sponsored large-scale codices of “sacred scriptures” – in essence, *the Bible as a single book.*”⁷² Kraft grants that the practice of collecting the entire Bible on codex did not happen until much later, but he speculates that possibility and the concept would cause a paradigm shift in how Christians thought about the Bible in totality. If this is true, and I think it is a sound argument, then the readers of scripture very well may have had a third person consciousness when they were reading inspired scripture. Therefore, its possible that the gathering of texts in collections was an act of recognizing which books were inspired and which were not.⁷³ Kraft

⁷⁰ For simplicity’s sake, I will call any writer’s canonical consciousness as “first-person” canonical consciousness and any readers’ as “third-person” canonical consciousness

⁷¹ See Robert A. Kraft, “The Codex and Canon Consciousness,” *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002, 229-233).

⁷² Kraft, “The Codex,” 230.

⁷³ David Trobisch proposes a similar theory. He proposes that the New Testament was not the product of centuries of gathering, but was produced as a single book, a “canonical edition,” in the second

speculates as to whether there was a stage on which what scriptures should look like was argued. Though inconclusive in his arguments, Kraft does open up for safe speculation that there was a canonical consciousness among those reading the scriptures. He concludes by saying, “isn’t it peculiar that our earliest examples of what came to be “biblical” Christian texts, apparently including the adopted Jewish scriptures, are predominantly papyrus codices?”⁷⁴ People began to think of the Bible as a set of scriptures both old and new. This hypothesis can be seen by a reading of early Christian writers. Writers such as Cletet of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, and others referred to the New Testament’s writings with equal authority as the Old.⁷⁵ Though Kraft’s speculation about a growing canonical consciousness seems to be a safe one, he does offer one more caution: we must recognize that once the Bible became recognized as something under one set of covers, it becomes difficult to recapture the perspectives of the time.

It may be argued that the readers of the New Testament possess a third person canonical consciousness from a very early time, but what of the writers of scripture? Was there a first person canonical consciousness? It is easy in the mind of many critics to think that the New Testament books were written and later on the church decided that they must be authoritative and inspirational. Lee McDonald holds to this theory. He says, “with the exception of the author of the book of *Revelations*, no conscious or clear

century. See David Trobisch, *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments: Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (NTOA 31; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); ET *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200).

⁷⁴ Kraft, “The Codex,” 232.

⁷⁵ See Everett Ferguson’s summary of early Christian terminology for the New Testament Scriptures “Factors Leading to the Selection and Closure of the New Testament Canon: A Survey of Some Recent Studies,” *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 304-309.

effort was made by these authors to produce Christian scriptures.”⁷⁶ Kline, however, makes the bold assertion that, “they realized, too, *that the covenant that was being documented in their writings* (emphasis added) was the renewal and fulfillment of the old covenant documented in the Old Testament Scriptures.”⁷⁷ This covenant structure theory deserves some fleshing out.

Kline argues that the New Testament functions much like the Old in that it is a presentation and ratification of a covenant document within a covenant community. It is a document between a king and his covenant community. Kline finds this first person consciousness in the overarching structure of covenant within the New and the Old Testament. For example, Paul says in *2 Corinthians* 3:6 that he and others were, “ministers of a new covenant.” Much like Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is a regiving of the law under a new covenant, the New Testament scriptures are an authoritative interpretation of the life of Jesus for his church. That message is intimately tied to the prophetic scriptures of the Old Testament. For example, Paul says in *1 Corinthians* 15:3, “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.” The message that Paul gave the Corinthians was that his message was in accordance with the authoritative scriptures of the Old Testament. It was of equal weight.

But a few passages from Corinthian letters are not enough to establish that the writers of scripture were delineating a covenant treaty and that they were aware of what they were doing. However, there are numerous passages that add to the force of this point. Note the following examples.

⁷⁶ Lee McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (rev. and enl. Ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 142.

⁷⁷ Kline, “The Structure of Biblical Authority,” 70.

2 Peter 1:19-21

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Peter also speaks of the certainty of the word that he has received and witnessed.

This is a certain word from the Old Testament prophets and an even more certain word from Jesus Christ. He calls the people to obedience and attention of this new word.

Amazingly, he does not quote Jesus extensively or even directly. His reference to a word made more certain is to his own writings. In essence, he calls his message prophetic and states that it did not come of his own origin. If he is saying that “we” have a sure message and then draws people to it, then his command is as authoritative as the word to which he is pointing and he knows it.

Hebrew 3:7-15

So, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.’ So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ ” See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”

Hebrews 3:7 is also an interesting passage for understanding first person canonical consciousness. The author quotes *Psalms 95:7-11* beginning with, “As the Holy Spirit says,” and then lays down authoritative teaching and application of that passage in light of one’s relationship with Jesus Christ. What is interesting is that the application of an Old Testament passage is the present working out of one’s sharing in Christ. The

today of the Old is the today of the new. The author writes with the intention of getting his readers to accept his interpretation just as binding as the teachings of the Old Testament and as binding as the teaching that comes from the Holy Spirit.

2 Timothy 2:13

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

Paul writes of Jesus Christ and calls Jesus' gospel his own. Jesus' gospel is Paul's gospel. His suffering is for the sake of that one and the same message. His assurance that that message will go out is proclaimed in the comment, "But God's word is not chained." What word is that? Some word from Jesus or from the Old Testament? Did Paul quote an Old Testament passage or Jesus himself? No, he is saying that his very own word is the word of God and nothing can keep it from going out. In addition, he adds a "trustworthy statement" that is neither Old Testament scripture nor the words of Jesus. Some speculate that this passage may have been an early church hymn. Whether or it is not inconsequential as Paul treats the passage as an authoritative word that is to be obeyed by the readers of this letter.

Titus 2:11-15

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.

Paul speaks of the truthfulness of Jesus Christ and sums up by saying, “These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.” Later on, he adds, “These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.” Paul writes with authority for the church and that authority stems from the grace of God which teaches all men. Paul is clearly aware that he is writing authoritative words that come from God because he confesses to being taught by the very grace of God himself. He is also clear that this is a message for all men, and therefore expected his commands to be carried out and disseminated. He is aware that some will question or despise this message, but his command is clear.

Colossians 3:12-17

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The book of *Colossians* exegetes applications for living in Christ. Without extensive quoting of Jesus Christ, Paul gives commands for holy living and sums them up by saying, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Paul teaches on love, compassion, humility, and forgiveness and never directly quotes Jesus himself. Yet, these are the “words of Christ”, by which Paul expects believers to live. What would cause Paul to do that, other than that he was aware that he was writing authoritative inspired words? He was preaching the words of Christ that he knew had the power to indwell and empower the believer.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

This passage is pretty clear. The word that Paul has preached was received as the word of God. Paul knew it was the word of God and clearly separated it from the words of men. The people who heard it made no mistake: the words were not the words of men but authoritative, inspired words that come from God himself. Paul clearly knew he was writing inspired scripture.

Edward Blum offers a nice summary view of this first person canonical consciousness. He says,

The New Testament writers' viewed their authority as coming from God. Paul, in particular calls himself an apostle, a herald, a witness and an ambassador (Rom. 1:1, 5; Gal. 1:8, 9; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Tim. 2:7). He declared that the letters he wrote were to be read in the churches and obeyed (Col. 4:16; 2 Thess. 3:14). This public reading followed the practice of the synagogue, in which the Old Testament writings were read (Luke 4:16-17; Acts 13:15). The prophetic word is now also to be read and obeyed (Rev. 1:3).⁷⁸

As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 2:13, "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words." The writers of the New Testament claimed authority in their writings and expected the readers to accept them as the words of Jesus Christ. They recognized each other's writings as scripture and a strong case can be made that the early readers of scripture had little doubt that they were reading the books that were to be the rule of faith for their lives.

⁷⁸ Edward Blum, "The Apostles View of Scripture," *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 51.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SELF-ATTESTING NATURE/RECOGNITION OF THE CANON

Undoubtedly, Bruce is right in that the early Fathers did have to ask questions about what texts were authoritative and which were not. And surely they did consider such issues as apostolic authority, antiquity, orthodoxy, catholicity, and inspiration. But a grave error is made if one thinks that the early Fathers held out that list and checked each criterion off for each of the twenty-seven books. If that is the case, we fall into Funk's thinking that canonization was the mere, "bureaucratization and politicization of the tradition."⁷⁹ If that is the case, that would not make the New Testament authoritative and the rejected books heretical. As Ridderbos says, "Historical judgments cannot be the final and sole ground for the church's accepting the New Testament as canonical. To accept the New Testament on that ground would mean that the church would ultimately be basing its faith on the results of historical investigation."⁸⁰ The church could only hope that the investigation was true and right and would have to hope for that as much as hoping for a true and authoritative canon. The historical investigation would be as important as anything that was written within the books of the New Testament. Historical investigations, as mentioned before, "no matter how reasonable they seem to us, are not the basis for recognition of the canon and in actuality, they never have been. What caused the church to accept the central components of the canon as holy and

⁷⁹ Funk, "The Once and Future New Testament," 543.

⁸⁰ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 32-33.

canonical was the certainty that those particular books had been received from the hand of the Lord Himself.”⁸¹

The fact that the canon is the testimony of Jesus and therefore speaks for itself is part of the nature of self-attestation. Self-attestation removes many of the debated questions. Ridderbos explains this when he says,

The canonicity of the Holy Scripture is sought in the fact that Christ again and again actually has been heard and continues to be heard in the event of preaching. The givenness of an historical canon...is hereby replaced by the actual self-witness of Christ within the Scriptures...As it lies before us, in its naked objectivity, the canon is not the word of God, nor is it identical with the gospel. It is rather the word of God only insofar as it is and repeatedly becomes the gospel. The question as to what the gospel is cannot then be answered by the historian. It can be decided solely by the believer who has been convinced by the Spirit and who has ears to hear.”⁸²

Several points need to be made here. Ridderbos is right when he says that the question of the canon and the gospel cannot be answered by the historian. This is because the historian thinks he sees by way of naked objectivity, if there is truly such a thing, mere words on paper, and the New Testament is mere words on paper. However, the scriptures, being the true witness of Jesus, transcend mere words on a page. The words resonate in the hearts of believers, testifying that they are the Gospel of Jesus. Therefore, when the defender of the canon uses historical defenses, that defender is fueling the fire for the historical critic to use those same defenses to debunk the canon. Instead of being a defender of the canon, one becomes an enabler to the critic. Scripture speaks for itself and therefore must be allowed to defend itself. In addition, by trying to prove the faithfulness of the canon by historical means, one hinders the power of those scriptures. In effect, the critic is no longer allowed to interact with the actual text, but instead,

⁸¹ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 43.

⁸² Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, 7.

interacts only with historical data. It is of no surprise that when the critic interacts with history and not the authoritative witness of Jesus Christ, it is determined that the canon is not inspired and questions arise as to its validity.

What's left if you do not approach scripture by its autopistic, or self-attesting, nature is mere human reason. Ridderbos says,

The final court of appeal lies in a human judgment as to what is deemed to be essential and central in the canon. And such a judgment may be based upon the science of historical criticism, the experience of faith of the church, or upon an actual hearing of God's word in the preaching. No matter what standard is employed, one thing is certain, namely, that such an outlook diminishes in principle the significance of the Scriptures as canon.⁸³

Neither the evidences of history, one's personal experience with the scriptures within or outside of church, or even hearing a good sermon is enough to validate the claims for a true and faithful canon. Any such claim, even pietistic ones from within the church, diminishes Scriptures' significance. One must say, "They are because they claim they are, and they claim they are because they are. My interaction did not make them what they are; yet my interaction with them acknowledges what they are."

This approach is of course not without criticism. Zahn criticizes this view as being an infallible criterion of canonicity that resides solely in the hearts of those who hold it.⁸⁴ There are elements of truth in Zahn's argument. By approaching the canon autopistically, the scriptures speak for themselves and demand that no one else do so for them. Now, readers do interact and testify to the power of the canon and the Holy Spirit. The scriptures are not without effect. In this,

The Holy Spirit not only bears witness to himself through the word, in this autopistae of the Holy Scriptures as the word of God, but he also bears witness to

⁸³ Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, 8-9.

⁸⁴ Th. Zahn, *Die bleibende Bedeutung des neutestamentlichen Kanos fur die Kirche*, 1890. Ridderbos in *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* offers a helpful summary of Zahn's argument.

himself with the Word, namely through the fact that the Word opens blind eyes to the light that shines in the Scriptures...this internal witness of the Holy Scripture is not the basis for, but it is the means by which the canon of the Holy Scriptures is recognized and accepted as the indubitable Word of God.⁸⁵

Once again, the self-attesting nature of the Scriptures, impressed upon the hearts of the reader by the Holy Spirit, is the means by which we know the canon. It is not the basis on which we know it. A high view of the historical traditions *may* say that the basis on which we know what the canon is is by the work of the Spirit and the evidences are mere support, but seeking justification through evidences still places authority of the word in the hands of the church. Then we would have to agree with Grant when he says, “It may also appear that the authority of New Testament and Church comes to be rather circular. The church uses the documents it has selected in order to provide its own credentials.”⁸⁶ The problem there is that it is the scriptures that *the church has selected* that give the church its authority and not the scriptures giving the church authority. This devalues the word, exalts man and human reason, and rightfully causes skepticism among many.

With that being established, the question of how the canon actually came together still arises. There are no official edicts of the church at that time declaring a canon gathering or any circulated criteria by which people might recognize true scriptures and reject heretical ones. Understanding then that the scriptures are autopoietic, or self-attesting, the process can be seen by observing the formation of various lists and canons, watching books being recognized as authoritative and others being discarded as non-canonical or even heretical.⁸⁷ As we approach this survey of the canonization process,

⁸⁵ Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, 10.

⁸⁶ Robert M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 186.

⁸⁷ See Everett Ferguson’s discussion on the closing of the canon. He says, “The first Christian writers to comment on which books were regarded as authoritative described them as having been “handed

keep in mind that this presupposition is not unique. Scholars have made sound cases for the fact that the books finally included in the canon were always seen as authoritative. John Barton, for example, notes that by the end of the first century, “much of the core [of the New Testament] already had as high a status as it would ever have.”⁸⁸ He emphasized this by making a case that at no time did Christians treat the canonical writings in the New Testament as anything other than scripture.⁸⁹ With this in mind, a survey of the various canon lists shows how over time the canon excluded the documents that were not inspired and protected the ones that were.

down” or “received.” This standard language for tradition was used about the canonical books. In reference to the Gospels, for instance, Irenaeus spoke of “the gospels handed down to us from the apostles” (*Haer.* 3.11.9), and, “The gospel handed down to us by the will of God in scriptures” (*ibid.*, 3.1.1). Clement of Alexandria specified “The four gospels that have been handed down to us” (*Strom.* 3.13.93). Serapion of Antioch rejected the Gospel of Peter as “pseudepigrapha,” “knowing that we [orthodox Christians] did not receive such writings” (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.12.3). The early ecclesiastical writers did not regard themselves as deciding which books to accept or to reject. Rather, they saw themselves as acknowledging which books had been handed down to them.” Ferguson, “Factors,” *The Canon Debate*, 295.

⁸⁸ John Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997), reprinted as *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 18-19.

⁸⁹ Barton, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 134-135.

CHAPTER NINE

CANON LISTS

Zahn, who made an extensive examination of the writings of the early Fathers, felt that by the end of the first century, there was a Christian canon that could, without anachronism, be called a “New Testament.”⁹⁰ With that in mind, examining the canonical lists will show this to be true as consistency among them becomes increasingly evident. Though this summary is far from extensive, it will attempt to include the most influential canonical lists⁹¹ as well as those writers that recommended books. Again, Bruce’s categorization in *The Canon of Scripture* is helpful and the following, unless noted, is a summary of his overview of the canon formation. As mentioned before, Marcion’s list was one of the earliest. Influenced by Syrian dualism, he pitted the new versus the old and Paul versus the Jews, so he totally disregarded the Hebrew Old Testament. Therefore his list included a highly edited version of the *Gospel of Luke* and ten of Paul’s letters, excluding the pastoral letters of *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*. Whether Marcion intended to leave them out or whether his edition lacked them, is not known. It is possible (but highly unlikely) that he simply did not possess them. The Chester Beatty

⁹⁰ For an excellent description of Zahn’s writing, see John Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 3.

⁹¹ There are fifteen undisputed lists of the Christian canon. They are Eusebius, Catalogue in Codex Claromontanus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, Mommsen Catalogue, Epiphanius, Apostolic Canons, Gregory of Nazianzus, African Canons, Jerome, Augustine, Amphilochius, Rufinus, Pope Innocent, and Syrian Catalogue of St. Catherine’s. See Hahneman, “The Muratorian Fragment and the Origins of the New Testament,” 413.

codex of Paul's letters (P46) lacks the Pastoral letters.⁹² Either way, the ten letters of Paul were highly edited as well.

Marcion's list however, was purposefully a sectarian one and not representative of the church. Concurrently, the church was gathering texts they felt were authoritative. In 1740, Lodovico Antonie Muratori published a Latin list of New Testament books that was originally drawn up somewhere near the end of the second century. It should be noted that the date of the Muratorian Fragment is debated. For a defense of an early dating, Charles Hill has argued well,⁹³ while G.M. Hahneman proposes a new theory on later dating.⁹⁴ The burden of proof appears to lie heavier with any theories of later dating. However, it must be noted that, "those who would place the Muratorian fragment in the fourth century do not doubt that by the late second century the four gospels, Paul's letters, and perhaps a few other documents, had already acquired commanding authority and broad use."⁹⁵

The list is fragmentary, so that *Matthew* and *Mark* do not appear, but doubtless they are presupposed, since *Luke* is referred to as the third gospel, and *John* as the fourth. Luke is also recognized to be the author of the "acts of the apostles." Thirteen letters are recognized as authentically Pauline. The list excludes an *Epistle to the Laodiceans* and another to the *Alexandrians* (which some take to be *Hebrews*). Two Johannine epistles and *Jude* are accepted. The apocalypses ascribed to John and to Peter are both accepted, but the list admits that there was some opposition to the public reading of the latter works. *The Shepherd of Hermas* is accepted for private but not for public reading, on the ground of its being such a recent composition. Gnostic, Marcionite, and Montanist writings are all rejected; a rather odd passage recognizes the *Wisdom of Solomon* to be canonical.⁹⁶

⁹² Bruce, *The Canon of the Scriptures*, 139.

⁹³ Charles E. Hill, "The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 57 (1995), 437-452.

⁹⁴ G.M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1992)

⁹⁵ Harry Y. Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis," *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 271.

⁹⁶ Carson, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 492.

Essentially, three-fourths of the New Testament is recognized. Already, it is clear that there is an intention to avoid such heretical books as *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Acts of Peter*. *The Shepherd of Hermas* is seen as edifying but not authoritative. Yet, several non-canonical books appear. *The Wisdom of Solomon*, an Apocryphal book is included as well as the *Epistle to the Laodiceans*. Bruce notes that the best guess as to what that epistle may be is, “a perfectly innocuous and imaginative cento of pieces from Paul’s genuine letters.”⁹⁷ By the late second century, the churches were clearly moving toward the present New Testament canon and discarding any books that might be heretical.

Irenaeus, an early disciple of Polycarp, himself a disciple of John, was a staunch opponent to Gnosticism and his intention was to establish the content of apostolic preaching and to, “strengthen...threatened believers and join them into a worldwide network.”⁹⁸ Reflected in that, he respectfully references all the books of the New Testament except *Hebrews* (though he did use it), *James*, *2 Peter*, *3 John*, and *Jude*. He also uses the *Shepherd of Hermas* (but not as scripture). Tertullian, whose writings are from 196-212, was the first to use the expression, “New Testament.” Though he never formally compiles a list, he does affirm certain works (the four *Gospels*, *Acts*, thirteen epistles of Paul, *1 Peter*, *1 John*, *Revelation*, and *Jude*) while never mentioning in either positive or negative manner *James*, *2 Peter*, and *3 John*. He does think favorably of *Hebrews* but negatively of *Shepherd of Hermas*. If one includes, which is fair, his inclusion of *Hebrews*, we now find a canon eighty-five percent complete by the end of the second century and the beginning of the third.

⁹⁷ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 167.

⁹⁸ Pagels, “The Canon of Truth and the *Gospel of John*,” 348.

Though there must have been various other lists recommended during this time, the most significant contributor to the development of the canon had to be Origen (AD 185-254).⁹⁹ He clearly recognizes the four *Gospels* and *Acts*. He references all thirteen Pauline epistles and insinuates that Paul may have written *Hebrews*. But the canon was by no means closed in terms of recognition at this point. Origen still questioned *2 Peter*, *2 and 3 John*, *James*, and *Jude*. So, Origen mentions all twenty-seven books and affirms twenty-one. He also uses the *Didache* and the *Letter of Barnabas*. Importantly, he rejects the *Gospel according to the Egyptians*, the *Gospel of the Twelve* and various other books as heretical. For those that he accepted, he clearly viewed them as inspired by God Himself.

Eusebius (AD 260-339), perhaps the second great church historian after Luke, is helpful in understanding the canonization process because he read prodigiously and researched various lists that each author included in his writings. Without an official canon as of yet, Eusebius basically counted the votes of the writers and classified the lists and books into three categories. The first list, called *homologoumena*, was the books universally accepted by the church at this time. These twenty-two books included the *Gospels*, *Acts*, the Pauline epistles (including *Hebrews*), *1 Peter*, and *1 John*. He also felt it proper to include *Revelation* though there was questions about its authenticity. The second list, *antilegomena*, is for books that are disputed but generally accepted. They included *James*, *Jude*, *2 Peter*, and *2 and 3 John*. So at this point in the early fourth century, the twenty-seven books of the New Testament are either universally accepted or generally accepted. Eusebius's final category was for those that were illegitimate or

⁹⁹ A summary of this Origen material can be found in Chapter 14 of Metzger's *The Formation of the New Testament Canon*.

spurious, basically those that were heretical. These books are *Acts of Paul*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Teachings of the Apostles*, the *Gospel according to the Hebrews*, the *Gospels of Peter, Thomas, and Matthias*, and the *Acts of Andrew and John*. He felt that if *Revelation* were proven to be inauthentic it would be included here. Eusebius' contribution is not to be underestimated. In his system, "he is endeavoring to give an accurate statement of the general opinion of the orthodox church of his date in regard to the number and names of its sacred scriptures."¹⁰⁰ At times, he is inconsistent by placing books in more than one list, but it is easy to determine the general state of the church's view towards the canon in the early fourth century through his efforts.

It needs to be noted that not all scholars view this three-fold division as I do. Some feel that the threefold nature shows a blatant disagreement among believers. Barton states, "And in every period, undercutting the apparent development of a 'canon', there is an underlying threefold division in the status of the books Christians read and cited, which remains remarkably constant throughout and makes one suspect that the idea of 'development' may be something of an illusion anyway."¹⁰¹ Barton feels that all canonical lists are apologetic in nature. Their intention was to show how orthodox the church is by limiting scripture. He adds, "at any event there is no need to suppose that people at large shared the writer's concern to delimit Scripture so exactly."¹⁰² One can easily see where this is headed. One historian looks at the evidence and says that the church Fathers created a propaganda list, but is not even willing to accept the fact that the church accepted it and if they did, there is no reason to think they accepted it for the same

¹⁰⁰ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 206.

¹⁰¹ Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text*, 21.

¹⁰² Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text*, 28.

reasons. Whether or not one sees the threefold division as a sign of the early church's unity or as a sign of its disunity is primarily based upon presupposition. Without a presupposition of the autopoietic nature of scripture, the interpretation of historical evidence becomes the ground for myriads of interpretations and opinions.

The recognition of the canon creeps toward a close by the end of the fourth century. The first undisputed list of twenty-seven books is found in Athanasius' Easter letter of 367. The Easter letter was an annual pastoral letter from the bishop of Alexandria to the Egyptian churches. In 367, Athanasius testifies that, "these are the fountains of salvation, that he who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone the teaching of godliness is proclaimed."¹⁰³ The first church council to recognize the twenty-seven books as the canon was the Council of Hippo in 393. Its statement was affirmed at the Third Council of Carthage in 397. Twenty-seven books from this point, none added or taken away, is the policy of the Latin Church. Though there were still some churches that questioned the canon, the churches for the most part followed the pattern of these councils.

¹⁰³ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 313.

CONCLUSION

It would be helpful if the canonization process were as simple and antiseptic as this paper presents it. It did take 300 years beyond the era of the apostles, but considering the age and the difficulty of reproducing and distributing written works, that is not a great deal of time. In such a limited space, steps of canonization and periods of time have had to have been skipped and skimmed in an effort to present the history of the canon in some sort of linear fashion. However, the intention has been to make several things clear despite the brevity of this effort. Early on, the church recognized whether books were consistent with the apostolic faith and witness contrary to the idea that the New Testament canon is a, “babel of voices,”¹⁰⁴ as some claim it to be. Instead, lists were put together to testify to the books that were impacting the church as well as those that were consistent with the testimony of Jesus. This written testimony was powerful in the lives of those in the early church. As Metzger says, “From this point of view the church did not create the canon, but came to recognize, accept, affirm, and confirm the self-authenticating quality of certain documents that imposed themselves as such upon the church. If this fact is obscured, one comes into serious conflict not with dogma but

¹⁰⁴ “Historical criticism has called the unity of the New Testament writings into question. The New Testament is now viewed as a babel of voices.” Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament,” 543.

with history.”¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the fact that the scriptures speak for themselves and are sufficient as their own defenders has been pressed. In addition, for those that wish to defend the authenticity and legitimacy of the canon as possessed presently, caution is urged. If the scriptures are continually devalued by looking to outside evidences for their defense, we set the stage for giving credence to Funk’s criticism. He says, “The sanctity of the Bible has been protected, for the masses, by a high level of illiteracy.”¹⁰⁶ Essentially, he says, no one even knows what the Bible says anymore and as a result, the authority of the scriptures is accepted blindly. Despite the high level of biblical ignorance prevalent today, Funk overlooks the enduring power and preservation of the New Testament over the past two thousand years. The people of the Bible may be ignorant of the texts that draw them together, but the Biblical community established out of those texts stand as a testimony to their power. Kline sums it by saying,

The community is inextricably bound up in the reality of canonical Scripture. The concept of covenant-canon requires a covenant community. Though the community does not confer canonical authority on the Scriptures, Scripture in the form of constitutional treaty implies the community constituted by it and existing under its authority. Canonical authority is not derived from community, but covenant canon connotes covenantal community.¹⁰⁷

The scriptures (the Old and the New Testament) have attested to their own authority and have established a community unlike any other ever seen on the face of the earth. Never in man’s history have millions and millions been attracted so powerfully to any one person (Jesus) or authority (the Bible). The scriptures and the message of Jesus that they embody speak for themselves soundly and powerfully. History and historical evidences merely attest to their endurance and truthfulness. One final note: it is often a criticism of

¹⁰⁵ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 287.

¹⁰⁶ Funk, “The Once and Future New Testament,” 549.

¹⁰⁷ Kline, “The Structure of Biblical Authority,” 90.

this approach that the reason historical evidences are avoided is because they point to a contrived, agenda-driven canon with no power. This is not the case in any way. It would be foolish to think that the scriptures are inspired and inherently speak of their own power, yet that they did not prove themselves true when examining the period of time in which the canon coalesced. History shows a living, breathing canon that was recognized by the church without any systemized effort or standardized criteria. The work of such writers as F.F. Bruce, Josh MacDowell, and others has been helpful in seeing the enduring power of the scriptures throughout history. Those men are to be applauded for their efforts and this work disagrees with them only in presupposition. But the fact must never be obscured that the scriptures speak to their authority and men and history are the mere witnesses to that fact.

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