

FACTORS PROMOTING THE FORMATION OF  
THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

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The topic assigned for this paper might imply a rather thorough analysis of the historical steps by which the canon came into its present form. Some may be disappointed not to be led over that beaten path. Others who do not agree with the method used may accuse the writer of begging the question. But there are certain convictions which have been growing upon the writer that he believes are germane to the question of canon and that must be given more attention if a satisfactory solution is to be found. Since these are fundamental issues, they will, with their application, consume a considerable portion of the allotted time. But it is hoped that a background will be formed for better use of the historical data alluded to.

The relevance of a purely secular historical approach is minimized by a presupposition with which the paper begins. It is assumed that no church council had the power or prerogative to authorize the canon. Therefore no decisive inference can be made from the Third Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. There is interest in Westcott's assertion that "from the time of Irenaeus the New Testament was composed essentially of the same books which we receive at present, and that they were regarded with the same reverence as is now shown them."<sup>1</sup> But there will be an attempt to probe farther back than the end of the second century. Marcion's heretical canon is worthy of note, but it will not be taken for granted as the "first New Testament canon of which we have any knowledge."<sup>2</sup> Nor will it be assumed with Harnack that the New Testament canon was assembled as an ecclesiastical counter-measure to offset the tide of Gnostic heresy.<sup>3</sup> Nor will time be taken to give all the reasons why it is believed that the majority of the New Testament books had long been recognized at Rome prior to the time of Marcion.<sup>4</sup> Attention will be given, rather, to matters of principle on which it is believed that the whole matter of canon rests. Observations will then be made in the light of those principles.

Early Existence of the Canon Concept

It is not necessary to duplicate the material of other panel members to prove that Jesus and His Apostles were familiar with an Old Testament canon that was already considered ancient. Prophecy, both written and

oral, was a familiar phenomenon among the Hebrews. Josephus gives graphic testimony to the reverence in which the books of the Old Testament were held so that "no one has been so bold as to add to or subtract from or to make any change in them."<sup>5</sup> Jesus Himself said, "and the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). The occasion of His statement makes it clear that He anticipated full agreement on the part of His Jewish hearers. It is entirely clear that the believers in Christ did not have to invent the idea of a canon. Both the principle and its application were already old to them. They had a canon.

Supreme Authority of Christ

The Jews believed in one God and had a canonical Scripture. What happened that caused an emphasis on the Trinity and that produced the New Testament canon? The answer is Jesus Christ. He was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy, the supreme authority for the church, and the fountain of New Testament revelation. The gospel is the account of His coming and the interpretation of its significance. He taught them as having authority. All other authority had to bow to His. Though He came not to destroy but to fulfil, He dared to say, "Ye have heard that it hath been said . . . But I say unto you" (Matt. 5:38, 39). One greater than prophet or scribe had come. He was Lord.

Could there be anything in Christ Himself or in His authority that would answer questions of canonicity? H. N. Ridderbos looks to the history of redemption and so to Christ. He admits, as everyone must, that the formation of the canon as a closed collection of twenty-seven writings belongs to church history. But he raises the significant question, "Is what makes the canon the sacred authority to which the church has bound itself and must continue to bind itself, to be sought in the history of the church or does it originate in the history of redemption itself?"<sup>6</sup> The problem is not simply the question of the word "canon," which occurs only a few times in the New Testament and then in a more general sense. It is, as Ridderbos says, "a question of the material authority that the writings incorporated into the canon had from the very beginning of the church, and that, at least in the West, also determined the ecclesiastical use of the term "canon" in the sense of a standard, rule, and norm for faith and life."<sup>7</sup>

The authority of Jesus is not only as Lord but also as Saviour. It is precisely because Jesus accomplished an adequate redemption that the New Testament was written. It is an authoritative offer of this salvation. Thus, as Ridderbos says, "This authority had its origin in the heart of redemption history itself. The very work of Jesus Christ is herein visible."<sup>8</sup> There are two factors here: first, "in Christ God maintained himself as

1. B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1881), p. 6.
2. H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943), p. 21.
3. Especially in his *Die Entstehung des neuen Testaments enz* 1914, pp. 40 ff.
4. H. N. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), pp. 43, 44.

5. *Against Apion*, I, 8.

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

'canon' opposite to the world" and secondly, "the work of Jesus is also here visible because Jesus himself established the means, the formal authority, by which what was seen and heard in the fulness of time was to be *transmitted* and *communicated*. And it was from this very authority that all future preaching of the gospel was to derive its content and be measured."<sup>9</sup>

#### Concept of the Apostolate

The first idea, the supreme authority of Christ Himself, hardly needs to be explained or defended to Christians. This was constantly demonstrated in His earthly ministry, joyfully accepted by the Scripture writers, attested constantly by the church fathers, and is central to any true Christian confession. He sits astride history and is Lord of all—even superior to the written Word.

It is the second idea—that of authoritative transmission and communication that we must explore. This directly involves the apostolate. At this crucial point, the writers of the Gospels are very clear. Jesus surrounded Himself by twelve disciples whom he ordained in order that they should be with Him and that he might send them forth to preach (Mark 3:14ff). Their role within the history of redemption was unique and not repeatable. As Ridderbos says, "Their most primary and important task was to be the very foundation of the Church, not only because they were the receivers of revelation but also because they were the bearers, the instruments of the revelation, to which Christ bound his church throughout all subsequent ages, the revelation, upon which he established and built his church."<sup>10</sup>

There are many facets to the New Testament presentation of the importance and the authority of the apostolate. But all come to focus in the words of Jesus Himself, "He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (Matt. 10:40). This reminds one of a legal "power of attorney." Referring to the uniqueness of the office of the apostle as seen in the very expression "an Apostle of Jesus Christ," Ridderbos says:

Recent research has shown that the formal structure of the apostolate is derived from the Jewish legal system in which a person may be given the legal power to represent another. The one who has such power of attorney is called a *Sjaliach* (apostle). The uniqueness of this relationship is pregnantly expressed by the notion that the *Sjaliach* (apostle) of a man is as the man himself.<sup>11</sup>

This gives special point to the words of Jesus, "as the Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21). The Apostles are thus uniquely

9. Ibid.

10. Op. cit., pp. 14, 15.

11. Op. cit., p. 15.

empowered to represent Christ. In an entirely exclusive sense Jesus entrusted the gospel of the kingdom to them.

#### Tradition in a Scriptural Sense

The proclamation of redemption was not left to chance, nor to human tradition in general, nor to reporting, nor to gifted preachers, nor to the preaching of the church. It was entrusted to these uniquely empowered Apostles. As Ridderbos says, "The preaching of redemption, as apostolic preaching, belongs to the actuality of revelation, and as such it has its own unique character. . . . This is the most holy faith on which the church has to build (see Jude 20, 17). This is what has been given through the apostles, the *depositum custodi* (I Tim. 6:20; II Tim. 1:14; 2:2) that the church has to keep above all things."<sup>12</sup>

Tradition, in this sense, was at first the oral preaching of the Apostles. When the Apostles began to write, they themselves placed the written word on the same level with the spoken word. For example, note Paul's exhortation, "Stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle" (II Thess. 2:15). In this sense tradition is the content of the faith which is handed down officially through the Apostles. Paul, for instance, refers to his function as twofold: to receive and to deliver (I Cor. 11:23; 15:1-4). It is here that the apostolic witness comes to focus. Paul would be the first to deny any originality in relation to his basic message. He passed on only what he had received. It has been well said that

The tradition of which the New Testament speaks is thus not an unchanneled stream which originates in the great redemptive events and is then perpetuated as the faith or the theology of the church. It is none other than the authoritative proclamation, entrusted to the apostles as witnesses of Christ and as the foundation of his church.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it was as if Christ Himself were proclaiming the gospel to the hearers over the whole world. Accordingly, Paul speaks of it to the Ephesians, "But ye have not so learned Christ; If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: (4:20, 21). Though the Ephesians and other residents of the Province of Asia never visited Palestine during Jesus' ministry and though they were indeed still pagans when Jesus ascended back into heaven, it was Christ whom they heard and by whom they were taught—through the Apostle, of course.

This tradition was equally valid whether presented orally or in writing. So Paul would have his letters read in the gatherings of the church (I Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16) in the same way as the Old Testament. To this end the churches exchanged Paul's letters with each other. Likewise John presupposed that the book of Revelation would be read to the

12. Op. cit., p. 17.

13. Ridderbos, op. cit., p. 20.

churches (Rev. 1:3). The same is seen in the Fourth Gospel, where the writer not only applied to his own writings the promise of the Holy Spirit, who would inspire the apostles in their witness to Christ (John 16:13 ff.; John 15:26, 27), but also at the end, where the witness to Christ consists in "writing of these things" (John 21:24). With this kind of "witness to Christ" in which the Apostles delivered the "tradition" that was given to them, the church had no other choice than to accept the New Testament books on an equal footing with the Old Testament—as the Word of God. "By giving authority to his apostles, Christ Himself has thereby given a foundation and canon to His church."<sup>14</sup>

So much for the canon in relation to books written by the apostles themselves. What about the books written by others? Ridderbos has an excellent note on this. He says:

It must be added that apostolic authority and apostolic tradition in the New Testament must not be bound to the person of the apostle. Such authority and tradition acquires increasingly its own "unpersonal" existence. What is apostolic is not limited to the *viva vox* of the apostles, nor to their own writings. It is more than that. The letters of Timothy and Titus bear witness to this contention. The apostolic witness authorized by Christ, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, belong to the *depositum custodi*, the treasure with which the church is entrusted (I Tim. 3:15; 4:6, 12; 6:20; II Tim. 1:14; 2:2). Therefore, even if the synoptic gospels were not written by the apostles, their content would still be received as the apostolic tradition and the apostolic gospel (Luke 1:1ff., Mark 1:1). What has been said does not deprive the apostolate of unique character; it emphasizes rather the way in which the apostles serve to provide the very foundations of the church. The question is, therefore, whether a particular book has this apostolic and canonical significance for the church. And this does not depend upon its having been written by the hand of an apostle. It is rather whether its content is a part of this basic apostolic tradition."<sup>15</sup>

#### The Historical Question

We have been saying, in short, that something is involved in the canon besides the history of human choice and decision. As Ridderbos says, "An historical judgment cannot be the final and sole ground for the acceptance of the New Testament as canonical by the church."<sup>16</sup> He strikes at the heart of the matter when he says:

The statements of a church council are not to be used as evidence that what has been selected is proper and correct. The church is never infallible, even temporarily. No ecclesiastical office or assembly, no matter how important, can guarantee the

14. Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

15. *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

16. *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

canon for the entire church, and its future. For its acceptance of the canon the church is bound to Christ alone. It depends on nothing else. What Christ has promised with respect to the canon is valid for the entire future church. The canon of Christ will persist, because there will continue to be a church of Christ, and the church of Christ will persist, because the canon of Christ will continue to exist, and because Christ, through the Spirit, will build his church upon this canon. This is the a priori of faith with respect to the canon of the New Testament. It is the faith a priori, based upon the unity of Christ's earthly and divine person, and upon his work.<sup>17</sup>

This, of course does not relieve one of studying the history of the canon. It is still important to know whether the canon of Christ is identical with the canon of the church. But the history of the canon will have to be viewed in the light of the a priori of faith.

If this is the proper view of the matter, the New Testament canon came not from a transfer of authority from the Old Testament canon with which the early church was familiar but from the original and proper authority of Christ and His Apostles. Accordingly, the canon came neither as an outgrowth of Marcion's labors nor as a reaction to his canon. Certainly then, it was not from the church of 200 A.D., and much less from the Third Council of Carthage in 397 A.D. Nor was it from the Council of Trent nor the Reformers. It is fortunate that after all the confusion, heresies, and backslidings of the first three or four centuries, the church did arrive at a united voice on the canon and that we can safely believe that they came to a right answer. But our faith is not based on the history of church councils. It is Christ who cannot be separated from the canon. As Ridderbos says:

What caused the church to accept certain writings as holy canonical writings was the certainty that these particular books had been received from the hand of the Lord himself. Here again is the a priori of faith with respect to the canon. Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the canon. We can know Jesus Christ only in the manner in which he appears to us in the canon of the New Testament. But it is equally true that we can not distinguish the canon correctly except in the light of Christ, who is not only the content, but is also the great presupposition of the canon. For in Christ is not only redemption, but also the trustworthy communication of redemption. Here lies to the present day the *principium canonicitatis*. The question of the canon is, therefore, not ecclesiastical but Christological.<sup>18</sup>

#### The Limits of the Canon

The oral gospel had become written. Another step was inevitable.

17. *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

18. *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

The written canon must be closed, especially as writings of doubtful origin and significance multiplied. The actual historical process was varied and of long duration. But it has never been proved that the early church at any time departed far from the present canon. Though there was a distinction made between homologoumena and antilegomena, these diversities and debates played only a secondary role in the church and did not strike at its foundations, as did Marcion the heretic. In comparison with what was clear and fixed, that which was in doubt concerned only a small number of writings. And, although the word "antilegomena" means "opposed," we are assured that in most instances one can not speak of an explicit opposition to the original "opposed" books.<sup>19</sup> Differences were mostly a matter of usage and not of principle. DeZwaan goes so far as to say, "We do not know any real conflicts over a difference in canon and such conflicts did not arise. It is also a fact that we can count on one hand the instances where an appreciable difference in practice temporarily occurred."<sup>20</sup>

It has been observed that the uncertainty about some books arose only later. For example, the opposition in the East to Revelation was a result of the anti-chiliasm movement. And the opposition in the West to Hebrews was after it had already been established to the extent that various passages from it were a part of the language of the church in the same manner as passages from other writers that had never been contested in the West.<sup>21</sup>

Two factors seem to have been decisive, in the last analysis, in settling the dispute about the canon. The first was the growing ecumenical unity of the church, before which sectional differences withered. The second and primary factor was the matter of content. Did the book in question agree with the great unquestioned body of canon? It was a matter of the apostolic "tradition" that settled the issue.

### Conclusion

The crucial question has proved to be not what influences led the church over a period of three or four centuries to form a canon but how the authority of the canonical books became clear to the early believers and how this "canon in principle" as well as "canon in fact" survived the varying fortunes of the church. The early church did have the analogy of an Old Testament canon. But its fulfillment was in Jesus Christ who, as the Living Word, stood superior to any written Word. He, the supreme authority to the church, bestowed authority upon duly ordained apostles who in a unique sense conveyed this "tradition" to those who became the church. This oral witness became also a written witness in the hands of the apostles and others with whom it was shared. Since Christ can be

known only in the light of the canon and the canon only in the light of Christ, the Living Christ in the church was the truest guarantee of the canon. For the most part, there were no serious deviations or conflicts in relation to the canon within the church. Those that did develop later withered under the growing ecumenical unity of the church and in the light of comparison with the contents of the core of which there had been no doubt. The issues were not settled by human authority. Nor is the evidence adduced solely by secular historical processes. Fundamental to the process is the a priori of faith. The history is a history of revelation. The authority of the canon is redemptive-historical. The categories for understanding and using it are *kerygma* (proclamation of redemption), *marturia* (witness to redemption), and *didache* (the doctrine of redemption). In so far as the church has been a believing and living church, it has not strayed far from the canon which comes from Christ.

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19. Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 48

20. J. de Zwaan, *Inleiding tot het Nieuwe Testament*, Vol. III, p. x. 1942, quoted by H. N. Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

21. W. C. van Unnik, quoted by H. N. Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 48.