

How the Books of the New Testament were Selected

by Richard Heard

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The phrases 'canonical books' and 'canon of scripture' are often used for the books which are recognised as authoritative for Christian doctrine, i.e. the books of our Bible. The Greek word 'canon', which originally meant a bar or measuring rod, came to mean a rule or standard, or even a list. The Christians early came to speak of the formulated profession of their faith, e.g. in the baptismal creed, as 'the canon of faith', and although the use of

'canon' and 'canonical' in connection with the books of the Bible probably came originally from the meaning of 'list' it naturally acquired also a sense of 'authoritative standard'. It is in this sense that to-day we speak of the books of our New Testament as 'canonical' or belonging to the Canon of the New Testament, because of the authority that has been attached to them by the Church. A great German scholar (C. R. Gregory, *Canon and Text of the N.T.*, p. 294) has written:

'Many Christians have caught hold of the word Canon and think that in the first half of the second century in some mysterious way the Spirit of God collected the whole of the New Testament in a single book -- and that since that time the whole Christian Church has stood by that book. The facts are very different.'

The process by which the books of our New Testament came to acquire their canonical authority was a long one, and in the case of such books as II Peter and Revelation involved much controversy. There were two main stages in the growth of the canon, first a period extending from the writing of the books to about A.D. 200 when most of the New Testament books had been collected and had acquired a position of authority side by side with that of the Old Testament, and then a further period of two centuries and more in which the bounds of the New Testament were finally fixed with very general agreement.

The Collection of The New Testament

The earliest Christians had at first no sacred books other than those of the Old Testament, which they, like their Jewish neighbours, regarded as the word of God. The books of our New Testament were written over a period of not much less than a hundred years, the earliest being perhaps the Epistle of James (c. A.D. 45 ?) and the Pauline epistles, the latest probably the pseudonymous II Peter (between A.D. 100 and 150). Most of the epistles were 'occasional writings', written in the first place to deal with particular situations and problems, and it is clear that Paul, for example, though he claimed to write with authority, never dreamt that some of his letters would later be collected and venerated as of universal application and of permanent authority. In the same way both Luke and 'Matthew' did not hesitate to treat Mark's gospel with considerable freedom, and to amend his narrative in many particulars.

Our knowledge of the early history of our canonical New Testament books is slender, but it is clear that most of them were preserved by the person or community for whom they were written, and that their circulation by means of copies must have originally been as separate units and comparatively slow. Their authority, too, was at first by no means undisputed, and from two early second-century writers we hear of people who preferred the authority of the Old Testament and of living witnesses respectively. Ignatius, writing to the Philadelphians c. A.D. 110 recalls that:

‘I heard some say, Unless I find it in the Charters (i.e the Old Testament) I believe it not in the gospel. And when I said to them, It is written, they answered me, That is the question.’

Papias, writing about ten years later, also in Asia Minor, gives as his own opinion

‘I did not think that I could profit so much from the contents of books as from the utterances of a living and abiding voice.’

With the passage of time, however, the prestige of these Christian writings increased, as the first and second generations of disciples passed away, and men turned instinctively for information to the written documents which preserved so many details of the ministry and teaching of Jesus and of what his apostles had taught. Readings from such writings must from an early period have played an important part in the services of the different churches, side by side with readings from the Old Testament; yet such readings were at first largely governed, not by any conscious conception of the ecclesiastical authority of these ‘new’ writings, but by what was available and edifying. We know that many books not in our New Testament were read in churches in the second century, e.g. accounts of martyrs and their sufferings, and the first epistle of Clement, written from the Church of Rome to that of Corinth and read in church there long after the occasion for its writing had passed away; we even hear of a Bishop of Antioch c. A.D. 190 visiting the church at Rhossus in Cilicia and approving the reading there of a gospel of Peter, only to withdraw his approval when he had later been informed of its heretical nature.

The epistles of Paul seem to have been formed within a generation of his death into a separate collection which enjoyed a wide circulation. The author of II Peter, writing in the first half of the second century, refers to ‘Paul . . . in all his epistles’ (3: 15-16), and Polycarp of Smyrna soon after A.D. 110 shows knowledge of at least eight of them. The Gospels, too, supplementing each other as they did, came to be grouped together, although the evidence suggests that their collection was later, and at first sometimes only partial; thus Justin Martyr, writing after the middle of the century, speaks of the ‘memoirs of the apostles’ as being read with the prophets in the weekly services (Apol. 68), but does not seem to include John’s gospel with the others.

Round these two main groups of writings collected other books, e.g. Acts and I Peter, but even in a large church not all our New Testament books would be known in the second century, while others not included in our New Testament seem often to have been collected and used as of comparable value and authority. The difficulties of circulation were very real, and it is by no means surprising that the Epistle of James, for example, is unmentioned by name in any Christian writing that has survived, up to the time of Origen in the third century.

It was not until the middle of the second century that the Church began consciously to erect a ‘canon’ of Christian writings, which could be reckoned (at least in a wide sense, e.g. Mark’s gospel based on Peter’s teaching) as apostolic, and the impulse to do so came from the heretics. The great heretical leaders in the second century supported their perversions of Christian doctrine by appealing to private traditions handed down by apostles, or even by forging or adapting gospels and epistles. Thus the followers of Basilides (fl. c. A.D. 130) claimed that he had been taught by one Glaucias, ‘the interpreter of Peter’, and they used also a kind of gospel that claimed to be ‘the Traditions of Matthias the Apostle’, while the great heretic Marcion established his own canon of scripture, rejecting the Old Testament and accepting as the only authoritative books carefully edited versions of Luke’s gospel and of ten of Paul’s epistles. The second century, too, saw

a spate of gospels, acts, and apocalypses, to which apostolic names were attached, but which contained little of historic value and much of legend and false doctrine. It was in the face of such developments that the Church was driven to make a clear distinction between those works which could be vouched for as of apostolic authority and the others.

By the close of the second century this process had advanced sufficiently for there to be general agreement within the Church on the acceptance as authoritative of our four gospels and thirteen epistles of Paul, and the refusal to accord the same veneration to such a nonapostolic work as e.g. the Shepherd of Hermas. In a list drawn up, perhaps at Rome, towards the end of the century, the late date of Hermas is stressed, and that

‘It ought also to be read; but it cannot be publicly read in the church to the people, either among the prophets, as their number is complete, or among the apostles, to the end of the time.’

Of the remaining books of our New Testament some were not yet in general circulation, e.g. James, Jude, II and III John; the apostolic authorship of others was not yet universally admitted, e.g. Hebrews and II Peter, and in the case of Revelation, with its material picture of heaven and of the thousand year reign of Christ before the end, the Eastern churches as a whole were still unwilling to accept its authority. The Christian Church, it must be remembered, was still only loosely organised, and although all of our New Testament books are continually quoted, and often quoted as authoritative, by Christian writers from the third century on, it was not until the close of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century that the Canon of the New Testament, as we know it, can be said to have obtained almost (The Syriac-speaking churches continued to hesitate for centuries about accepting II Peter, II and III John, Jude and Revelation, and their doubts about Revelation were long shared by the Greek Church generally.) universal acceptance.

The Value of The Canon

The Canon of the New Testament was fixed in accordance with two criteria, that the writings which it contains were apostolic, and that the words of these writings consequently had an authority which could not be given to other Christian writings, however edifying. How far can the books of the New Testament still claim such an especial authority ?

Before discussing the effects of recent biblical criticism on our estimation of the value of the canon, it is well to remember that, even in the days when the authority of scripture was accepted on the traditional grounds, not all Christians have accorded an equal authority to all the books. Thus Luther could say of the Epistle of James that ‘it has no character of the gospel in it’, and refuse to count the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of Jude among the books necessary to lay the foundation of faith. Calvin, too, significantly omitted the Book of Revelation from the number of New Testament books which he furnished with a commentary.

But it is within the last century that the whole conception of canonicity has been subjected to criticism on the basis of our new knowledge. The general rejection of the apostolic authorship of e.g. the Gospel of Matthew, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation, has changed the basis on which authority can truthfully be claimed for the New Testament. The whole conception, too, of the absolute authority of every word of the New Testament has itself been undermined. Thus an Archbishop of Canterbury has felt able to withdraw the ban on women coming bare-headed to church, in spite of the words of Paul in I Cor. 9: 5-16. While this is in itself, of course, a minor matter, it illustrates a very important principle, that the words even of Paul must be weighed by the teaching of Christ before they can be accepted as fully authoritative.

This is not to say that once the traditional principles on which the canon was established have been challenged, the whole idea of an authoritative canon must be abandoned. A truer estimate of the results of modern criticism would be that it has substituted for the traditional principles new ones which establish the authority of our New Testament on sounder and abiding foundations.

While the New Testament can now be regarded as 'apostolic' only partially, and in a very wide sense, it remains true that the New Testament does contain substantially all that has survived of those first-century Christian writings which preserved the knowledge of the early ministry of Christ and the teaching of the first Christian generation. As such it is of unique authority for Christians. None of the other Christian writings which survive from the first and second centuries can rank as serious competitors for inclusion; neither in information about Jesus nor in the formulation of Christian doctrine do they add anything that is at once important and primitive. Only in the New Testament itself can we still have confidence that the essential truths proclaimed by the apostles are preserved, even if we now must add that the books of the New Testament are not free from faults and errors. The true significance of canonicity lies not in the inerrancy of scripture, but in the fact that it 'containeth all things necessary to salvation'.

Books for Reading

A. Souter. *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*

(Duckworth).

The article, 'The Bible in the Church', by Bishop Gore in *The New Commentary* (S.P.C.K.) gives a short but interesting account of the growth of the idea of canonicity.

C. R. Gregory. *Canon and Text of the New Testament* (Clark).

A. Harnack. *The Origin of the New Testament* (Williams and Norgate).