

## THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

### 1. What is meant by canon?

At the beginning of our discussion on the Canon of Scripture we need to understand what is meant by the term canon and also what is implied by it. The word "canon" means a rule or standard. When we speak of the canon of Scripture we are referring to the body of writings which, as Scripture, constitute the rule or standard by which our lives ought to be governed and measured.

Note firstly then that the very concept of a Canon of Scripture and talk about the content of that canon implies that Scripture is qualitatively different from all other writings. Scripture has the right to rule our lives. This is so, and can only be so, because Scripture is the very word of God, breathed out from his mouth, for God alone has the sovereign right to rule over us. Talk of the canon of Scripture makes sense only to those who have a high view of Scripture.

We do hold such a high view of Scripture and so ought to be interested in and concerned about the canon of Scripture. Since the Scriptures are qualitatively different from all other writings, and since it is just such Scripture that is to govern and mould our lives, we need to be clear concerning the extent and limits of Scripture: we need a clear understanding of exactly what is Scripture and what is not.

This may be a question which has never really bothered us. After all, we have our Scriptures bound together in one book, the Bible. It is clear to us that this book is Scripture and all other literature is not. It may never have crossed our minds to ask how these various writings came to be collected together and recognised as Scripture.

However, this is by no means a trivial question. We believe the Scriptures to be fully human even though they are equally fully divine. In the words of Peter, "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The Scriptures did not descend fully formed from heaven, they were written by men in the language of their own day. It is not immediately obvious therefore what qualities distinguish Scripture from other human writings. To say that it is the Divine origin of Scripture which makes it Scripture is quite true but of no practical help. Faced with a number of documents, we have no way of discovering their origin except by means of their content. So we return to the question of what it is that marks out Scriptural writings from those of purely human origin.

The question of canon is therefore a peculiarly Christian question -- or more accurately a peculiarly Judaeo-Christian question. It is not an issue with the Hindu, Muslim or, for that matter, the Mormon. It is a peculiarly Christian question because of our distinctive view of Scripture as both fully human and yet fully divine. It is, I would maintain, a distinctively Christian question since the Christian alone has recognised this mystery of God's self-revelation through the incarnate word, a self-revelation which finds its pre-eminent and final expression in Christ, the word made flesh.

The question of the canon of Scripture -- which writings are scriptural writings and which are not -- has troubled God's people at various times in their history. The Jews before the coming of Christ were exercised about this question and continued to debate it after the days of Christ. The Christian church in its early centuries had also to wrestle with this question both with regard to the Old Testament writings and to the New. The Reformation, with its recovery of a high view of Scripture, saw a replay of these ancient arguments. We shall be looking at something of this history below.

But this question is not merely of historical interest, it is also of great practical importance to us today. We also need to be clear as to the extent and the limits of Scripture. In the face of liberal views which

would rob the Scriptural documents of their authenticity we need to hold fast to the word of God in the confidence that this is God's word. In the light of the claim of certain Christians to authoritative words of prophecy and of revelation we need to be clear concerning the limits of the word of God and the unparalleled authority that belongs to that word. But it is not my intention in this study merely to point the finger at others. I am concerned primarily with our own misuse and neglect of the word of God. We need to realise afresh the distinctive authority that belongs to the Scriptures as God's word and, above all, we need to live under its rule.

My plan in this study is to look at the history of the canon -- the historical process by which the Scriptural documents were collected, recognised as Scripture and compiled into one book, our Bible. I want then to draw out a number of practical conclusions so that what we have learnt may be applied to our own lives.

## **2. Church and Canon**

Before we look at the history of the Canon of Scripture we need to look briefly at a couple of themes which will paint the backcloth against which we want to set our study. The first of these themes concerns the relationship between the church and the canon of Scripture. By church we mean here those to whom the Scriptures were given -- the Jewish people under the Old Covenant and the Christian church under the New.

It is vital that we have a proper understanding of the role of the church in establishing and fixing the canon of Scripture. God alone can create Scripture, it is breathed from his mouth. The church therefore cannot make any book or document Scripture. The role of the church in establishing the canon of Scripture is that of recognising what is Scripture and what is not.

To put the matter another way: the church does not give any authority to Scripture -- indeed, how could it do so for the church takes its authority from scripture. The scriptures have authority in themselves, they are self-authenticating. The role of the church is not to give authority to these documents but to recognise their authority and to bow to that authority.

There is an irreducible mystery which therefore surrounds this subject of the canon of Scripture, a mystery in every way parallel to that which characterises the giving of Scripture itself. There is no slick answer to the question of what distinguishes scripture from the non scriptural writings of godly men. The former are not Scripture because the church has declared them to be so. Rather, the divine authority of these documents has impressed itself upon the people of God demanding obedience and worship.

This recognition of Scripture by the church is seen first and foremost not in the declarations of church councils but in the place such documents occupied in the worship of the church. It was here, in the worshipping community, that Scripture exercised its God-given role, outlined in 2 Timothy 3:16 of teaching, rebuking, correcting and training God's people in righteousness. The declarations of church councils followed, recognising the authority which such documents already exercised among the people of God.

## **3. The Giving of Scripture**

The second theme I want to focus on briefly before we look at the history of the canon is the occasion and purposes for which Scripture was given.

The scriptures were not given as abstract revelation concerning the character of God and the nature of the universe. They were not given as a one-off systematic theology. If God had chosen to reveal himself like that, no doubt he would have presented Adam with a Bible in Eden.

The Scriptures are the definitive and authoritative record of God's plan and acts of redemption. As such, the process of revelation and the inscripturation of the word by and large accompanies God's historic acts of redemption. (Anyone wanting to pursue this theme a little further might like to look at Geerhardus Vos on Biblical Theology.) The Pentateuch was given through Moses when Israel was brought out of Egypt. The historical books, along with the prophets, are prophetic literature written as a critique of the kingdom and revelation of the kingdom. The New Testament, most obviously, is revelation in which God's pre-eminent act of redemption in Christ is set forth.

The Scriptures therefore are more than a rule or book of rules; they are the setting forth of what God has done and will yet do, with the accompanying demand for response from the people of God. The recognition of scripture by the church is part of its response to the redemptive activity of God. With this backdrop in place we are now in a position to look at the historical process by which the Scriptures we now possess were recognised as scripture.

#### 4. The History of the Hebrew Old Testament

The Old Testament (with the exception of a few chapters in Aramaic) was written in Hebrew. This body of Hebrew literature was written over a period of more than 1000 years. By the time of Christ it was already a defined and complete body of literature, recognised as Scripture. Jesus was often at odds with the Jewish authorities over the meaning and significance of the Scriptures but at no point do we detect any disagreement between them over what those Scriptures were. Indeed, Jesus was at pains to declare that it is precisely these Scriptures -- the Scriptures which they recognise as God's word and profess to respect -- precisely these Scriptures to which he also makes his appeal, for they speak of him (Jn 5:39).

The Hebrew Old Testament is divided into 3 volumes. First there is the Torah or law which encompasses the first five books of the Bible. Secondly there are the Nebiim or prophets. This literature consists of the Former prophets which are the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings and the Latter Prophets which consist of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 'Minor Prophets'. The historical books are considered prophetic literature in the Hebrew Canon because of their origin in the prophetic circle which began in the days of Samuel -- though Joshua and Judges clearly incorporate earlier eye-witness accounts of the events which they relate. The third section is the Kethubim or Writings which includes Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah and Chronicles.

This completed three-volume body of Scripture was the Bible of Jesus' day. In Luke 24:44 we read how Jesus told the two on the way to Emmaus that "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Jesus speaks here of the entire body of the Old Testament Scripture under these three heads corresponding to Torah, Nebiim and Kethubim, the latter volume being referred to by the first book within that volume. Again, in Luke 11:50 Jesus says that the unbelieving Jews of his day will be held responsible for "the blood of all the prophets that was shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary." Jesus here seems to be referring to the first and last martyrs spoken of in the books of Scripture. The Zechariah referred to would seem to be Zechariah son of Jehoiada who was stoned to death in the court of the Lord's house because he rebuked the king of Judah for disobeying the commands of God (2 Chronicles 24:20-22). This Zechariah was not chronologically the last of the prophets to die but he was last in the books of Scripture as they are ordered in the Hebrew Old Testament where Chronicles is the last book of the Bible. By these words then, Jesus bears testimony to a body of literature from Genesis to Chronicles which was recognised unambiguously as Scripture by both himself and his hearers.

It was only after the fall of Jerusalem that there seems to have been discussions which raised questions concerning the canonicity of various Old Testament books. A number of Jewish rabbis held discussions at Jamnia after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. They discussed which books "defiled the hands", that is, were sacred or divine. They concluded that Joshua ben Sira's Ecclesiasticus (to be distinguished from Ecclesiastes) inculcated true religion and seemed no less orthodox than Ecclesiastes or Proverbs yet it was not to be deemed sacred. Proverbs caused these men difficulties since it contradicts itself in two adjacent verses (Proverbs 26:4,5), yet it was concluded that these differing words of advice were suitable for different circumstances. Thus Proverbs was admitted as sacred. Ecclesiastes was also considered difficult as it seemed to be rather unorthodox in places. An interpretative gloss was placed upon such passages and so Ecclesiastes was admitted as sacred. Both Esther and the Song of Songs were questioned since neither mention the name of God. The former was admitted since it formed the historical background to the Jewish festival of Purim and the latter because it was supposed to present a picture of God's love for Israel. Ezekiel also caused these men problems since the opening chapter of visions and latter chapters concerning the new Temple were used (and abused) by various mystical Jewish sects. One of this rabbinic group, Hananiah son of Hezekiah at last produced a lengthy reconciliation between Moses and Ezekiel. In consequence, Ezekiel was also admitted as sacred.

Now it is interesting to notice exactly what is going on here. These men were clearly not deciding what was scriptural and what was not. If it had been up to them they would have preferred Ecclesiasticus to Ecclesiastes. What they were doing was seeking to rationalise and justify what was universally recognised, that certain books were Scripture and others, however orthodox, were not. They were wrestling with the mystery of the self-authenticating character of Scripture.

What is it that distinguishes Scripture from non Scripture? Jamnia bears witness to the fact that the distinction is impossible to categorise and yet nevertheless is very real. Ultimately the difference is this, that the Scriptures which God breathed carry his breath (his Spirit) with them and enforce themselves upon the attention of the people of God.

## 5. The Greek Old Testament

In the centuries before Christ, many of the Jewish nation became scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. With the rise of Alexander the Great this world became a Greek speaking world. Many Hebrews grew up with a scant knowledge of their national tongue, speaking only Greek. For this reason, some time between 250 and 150 BC the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek. This Greek Old Testament came to be called the Septuagint because it was supposed to have been the work of 70 men.

This Greek Old Testament circulated along with various other spiritual Jewish writings, some of which were translated from the Hebrew and others of which were originally written in Greek. The Septuagint ordered the Old Testament books in much the same order as is common in our English Bibles but included:

- 1 Esdras (2 Esdras = Ezra and Nehemiah)
- Judith
- Tobit
- Additions to Esther
- Wisdom
- Ecclesiasticus
- Psalm 151
- Baruch
- The Letter of Jeremiah
- Additions to Daniel (History of Suzannah, Bel and Dragon)
- Books of Maccabees

It does not seem that these books, sometimes known as the Septuagintal plus, were necessarily viewed as Scripture by the Jewish community. They were simply spiritual writings which circulated along with the Scriptures.

The early church was largely a Greek speaking church, and for this reason the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Old Testament became the Bible of the early church. New Testament writers often quote the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Old Testament, see for instance Psalm 40:6 and Hebrews 10:5.

What did such New Testament writers consider to be the extent of the canon of the Old Testament? Did their canon include the books which the Septuagint includes but which are absent from the Hebrew Old Testament? The New Testament supplies us with no direct answer to this question. New Testament writers generally quote from the books that are to be found in the Hebrew Old Testament. However, they do not quote from all of these books. The fact that an Old Testament book is quoted in the New Testament cannot therefore be made a criterion of canonicity. Moreover, there are New Testament allusions to books not found in the Hebrew Old Testament, such as Jude's allusion to the book of Enoch. There are also several New Testament quotations the source of which is unclear (e.g. 1 Cor 2:9, Eph 5:14).

Whatever we may think of the matter, the New Testament nowhere contains a clear and unambiguous statement concerning the extent of the Old Testament canon. But that does not mean that we are without evidence. We need to bear in mind the testimony of Christ which we spoke of earlier. Jesus words indicate that he considered as Scripture that body of Hebrew writings which were read week by week in the Synagogues of Judea and Galilee, a body of Scriptures which began With Genesis and ended with Chronicles. These were those Scriptures which pointed to and found their fulfilment in him.

The early church, however, inherited a Bible which was the Hebrew Old Testament plus a number of other writings. Before long the church had to face up to the issue of which of these books were to be thought of as Scripture and which were not. Church leaders at various times compassed lists of the scriptural Old Testament books. Melito of Sardis in about 170 AD gives a list of the Old Testament books which is identical to our own Old Testament except that he makes no mention of Esther. He includes none of the extra writings of the Septuagint -- none of the Septuagintal plus.

Athanasius in 367 gives a list which does include several of the Septuagintal additions, namely 1 Esdras, Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah and probably also the Greek additions to Daniel. He also omits Esther from the list of canonical books but commends that it be read in the churches. The Greek speaking Eastern church after the time of Athanasius progressively accepted the entire Septuagintal plus as part of the Old Testament.

The Christian church in the West was a Latin speaking church. Various parts of the Septuagint had been translated into Latin, including the Septuagintal plus. In about 380, Jerome produced a new Latin translation of the Bible. Jerome was a Hebrew scholar and was aware that the Hebrew Old Testament was different from the Greek. Jerome lists the books of the Hebrew Bible. What cannot be found in the Hebrew he says ought to be set aside as Apocrypha. He states that such books as Ecclesiasticus, the Wisdom of Solomon, Judith, Tobit and the Books of Maccabees may be read for edification but are not to be received as canonical and may not be used for the establishing of ecclesiastical dogma.

Jerome's statement, clear and precise though it was, failed to have a dominating influence upon the Western church. The people had become too fond of some of these apocryphal tales to abandon them. Augustine revered Jerome yet had no great liking for his Latin translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. He would have preferred Jerome to have provided a better Latin translation of the Septuagint. Augustine in his list of the books of the Old Testament includes the Septuagintal plus or Apocrypha. From this time on, the Western or 'Catholic Church' recognised the Apocrypha as part of Scripture.

Serious debate on the extent of the Old Testament canon was not revived until the time of the Reformation. The Reformation saw a new appreciation of the authority of Scripture. The Reformers argued that Scripture and Scripture alone has the right to rule over the people of God. This principle,

with its war cry of "Sola Scriptura", was naturally accompanied by a renewed desire to make clear just what writing were Scripture and which were not.

Luther followed Jerome in rejecting the Apocrypha and accepting only the books found in the Hebrew Old Testament. The same was true of Calvin and of the English Reformers and Bible translators such as Tyndale and Coverdale.

In response, the Roman Catholic church at the Council of Trent formally laid aside Jerome's distinction and spoke of one canon of Scripture which included the Apocrypha. The division between the Reformational churches and the Roman Catholic church concerning the status of the Apocrypha has remained since that day.

The Roman Catholic Council of Trent makes clear that it was not simply recognising the Apocrypha as Scripture: the council declared rather that the church has the authority to determine the extent of Scripture. This same council also declared that the traditions of the church ought also to be received as the word of God since God speaks thorough his church.

It is significant that Bible believing Christians, who recognise that the church is the creation of the word and not the word the creation of the church, reject the authority of the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha may be interesting reading and, in places, edifying, but it is not part of the authoritative word of God. The 1689 confession, following the Westminster Confession states this point clearly in chapter 1 paragraphs 2-4.

As disciples of Christ, we choose to follow our Lord in holding to the Old Testament Scriptures which he himself revered and which he declared to be those which spoke of him.

From the Old Testament canon we now turn to the question of the canon of the New Testament.

## **6. The History of the New Testament**

The New Testament was not written as one volume of sacred writings but as a number of individual documents, each written for a particular purpose or readership.

Paul's letters are the earliest of the New Testament documents. Each was written for a particular church or group of churches. None, not even the letter to the Romans, was intended as an abstract and comprehensive exposition of the gospel. Each was written out of pastoral concern and deals with issues which are particularly appropriate to the church being addressed. Paul may well have viewed his letters as second best to a personal visit: he would rather have spoken with the churches face to face (see Gal.4:20). In the goodness of God however, they remain as a permanent testimony to the gospel and as the word of God to us.

The four Gospels were written as records of the things that Jesus said and did. Such written records became more necessary for the churches as those who had been eyewitnesses of the Lord began to be removed by death. Luke wrote Acts as a continuation of his Gospel account. He intended it to be viewed as testimony to the continuing work of Christ among his people by his Spirit. Other particular needs gave rise to Hebrews and the epistles of James, Peter, John and Jude. The book of Revelation was also written firstly for a particular group of churches.

Each of these writings would originally have belonged to the church in one particular town or group of towns, the church or churches for whom it was written. Their preservation bears testimony to the way in which these documents were treasured by the churches as apostolic testimony to Christ and the gospel. One church would seek to obtain a copy of the writings possessed by a neighbour and so collections of New Testament writings began to circulate among the churches.

The four Gospels began to circulate together among the churches from the middle of the second century. We have historical evidence that Paul's letters were circulating together from early in the second century. It is not unlikely that they were collated even in New Testament times, perhaps by Luke. 2 Peter 3:15,16 seems to suggest that Paul's letters were a recognisable body of literature which was considered as Scripture alongside the Old Testament. The oldest surviving manuscript of the Pauline letters is the Chester Beatty codex p46 dating from about AD 200. This does not include the Pastoral Epistles but does include Hebrews.

The first such collections of New Testament writings were informal collections valued and recognised as testimonies to Christ. The question of their canonicity does not seem to have arisen in these early days.

The question of the extent and limit of the New Testament canon was prompted by a number of factors:

i) By Marcionite editing and deletion. Marcion was a man who lived in the middle of the second century. He adopted a hyper Pauline view of the gospel with an absolute antithesis between law and grace. He rejected the Old Testament, claiming it to be testimony to an inferior god to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Marcion's Scripture consisted of an edited version of Luke's Gospel, excluding, among other things, the birth narratives of Christ. The only other documents he accepted were edited versions of Paul's epistles (without the Pastorals). Marcion omitted anything which he considered to be inconsistent with his own understanding of the Gospel and particularly anything which suggested an element of continuity between Judaism and the gospel. Such an edited New Testament challenged the church to make clear the true extent of the word of God in the gospel.

ii) Gnostic Additions. In the second century and beyond there were false teachers who claimed that Christ and the Apostles had passed on orally 'secret teachings' additional to what they had committed to writing. These teachers claimed knowledge of such secret teachings which they would now pass on to their disciples. A body of writings began to be produced by such "gnostics" (knowers) such as Valentinus' "Gospel of Truth". Such additions to the Gospel challenged the church to define the limit of the canon of Scriptural teaching.

iii) Pious fables and traditions. From the middle of the second century various collections of fables concerning Jesus and the apostles began to circulate among the churches having such titles as Acts of Peter", "Acts of Paul", "Acts of Andrew", "Gospel of Thomas" etc. The church needed to respond to such writings by drawing a clear dividing line between such pious forgeries and the genuine Gospels, Acts and letters.

iv) The growing body of revered and orthodox Christian writings. The apostles were not the only men to write Christian letters. Later church leaders such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna all wrote letters to various churches. Such letters from godly men were treasured for their sound advice and spiritual wisdom. Other spiritual writings such as the Shepherd of Hermas were extremely popular among the churches at the close of the second century. Here again it was necessary for the church to distinguish between the divine authority of Scripture and the sound exhortation of Christian ministers.

These four developments made the question of the extent of the New Testament canon a pressing question for the church.

The earliest extant list of documents recognised as New Testament Scriptures is the Muratorian Fragment dating from the end of the Second century. It reflects what the church at Rome at that time considered to be New Testament Scriptures. The list consisted of:

- 4 Gospels and Acts
- Paul's letters, all 13 of them
- Jude
- 1 and 2 John
- Apocalypse of John
- Apocalypse of Peter

They rejected the Shepherd of Hermas and Gnostic writings.

Tertullian, a Christian writer of around 200 AD gives the following list of what he considers to be New Testament Scriptures:

- 4 Gospels and Acts
- 13 Pauline Epistles
- 1 Peter
- 1 John
- Apocalypse of John
- Jude

He makes no mention of James, 2 Peter or 3 John. He does mention Hebrews which he thought worthy to be included among the apostolic writings. Tertullian thought that it might have been the work of Barnabas. He mentions the Shepherd of Hermas and rejects it as not being apostolic.

Origen, a biblical scholar of the early part of the third century, distinguishes undisputed New Testament documents from those over which there is disagreement among the churches. The undisputed ones, according to Origen, are:

- 4 Gospels and Acts
- The Pauline Epistles
- 1 Peter
- 1 John
- Apocalypse

Disputed scriptures are:

- Hebrews
- 2 Peter
- 2 and 3 John
- James
- Jude.

Origen admitted that Hebrews often circulated with the Pauline letters, but he believes that it was written by another hand. As for who its author might have been, Origen declares that God alone knows. Origen also mentions the Didache, the Letter of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas as spiritual works, valued among the churches, but not, in his opinion, of the same weight as the apostolic writings.

Eusebius in the early fourth century was asked by the Emperor Constantine to prepare 50 Bibles for the churches of his new capital city, Constantinople. In preparation, Eusebius produced three lists of books. In the first he included all those writings which were universally accepted among the churches as Scripture. This list consisted of:

- 4 Gospels and Acts
- The Epistles of Paul and Hebrews
- 1 Peter
- 1 John
- Apocalypse

Notwithstanding his inclusion of Hebrews in this list, Eusebius expressed personal doubts about the authority of this letter. The second list consisted of those writings which were accepted by the majority of the churches. This list was made up of:

- James
- Jude.
- 2 Peter
- 2 and 3 John

The third list consisted of works generally regarded as spurious and included:

- The Acts of Paul
- The Shepherd of Hermas
- The Apocalypse of Peter
- The Gospel of Thomas.

The Bibles produced by Eusebius for Constantine contained all books on the first two lists and consisted of the same 27 New Testament books that we have in our Bibles today.

Jerome in 414 spoke of the reluctance of the Eastern church to receive the Apocalypse and of the Western church to receive Hebrews. Jerome concluded that both ought to be accepted as Scripture.



The extent and limits of the New Testament canon have not been the subject of serious debate since the fourth century.

## 7. Criteria for New Testament Canonicity

By what criteria were our present New Testament documents distinguished from other writings and judged to be from God?

The first of such criteria was that the scriptural documents all bear witness to Christ. The Christian is not bound to the letters of a book: he or she is bound to the person of Christ whom they own as Lord. We receive the Old Testament as authoritative because Christ declared it to be so and to be the Scriptures that speak of him. In exactly the same way, the New Testament Scriptures have impressed themselves upon the people of God because they bear witness to Christ and to God's acts towards us in Christ.

Secondly, these Scriptures are the authoritative witness to Christ. The Apostles are those who were eyewitnesses of Christ (see Acts 1:21,22). Paul is conscious of the peculiarity and uniqueness of his own apostolic calling as one commissioned by the risen and ascended Christ (1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8). Paul argues that his authority is no less than that of the other apostles (Gal. 1:17, 2:8). It was Christ who promised a special ministry of the Spirit to his apostles by which they would be enabled to remember the things that he had said and done and expound them authoritatively to others (John 16:12-15, see John 2:19-22 etc.). The apostles spoke and wrote with an authority which was no less than the authority of God himself (see Gal. 1:8, 1 Cor 2:13). The New Testament writings are the authoritative apostolic witness to Christ, a witness which carries the authority of Christ himself.

As far as the early church was concerned, a writing was to be considered canonical if it was apostolic. For a document to be apostolic it did not have to have been written personally by an apostle, but it had to have its origin with an apostle -- to have come from the apostolic circle. Mark was understood to have written his Gospel as he listened to Peter speak of what Christ had said and done. Luke was part of Paul's apostolic circle. James and Jude, not without some debate, were considered late adoptees into the apostolic circle at Jerusalem. The one document which could not easily be fitted into this scheme was the Epistle to the Hebrews. No-one was sure who had written it, but from early times it circulated with the Pauline letters even though it was distinguished from them. It was therefore felt to have come from the Pauline circle -- to have been the work of Paul or more probably of one of his helpers.

Once again we see the difficulty of coming up with clear and unambiguous criteria for canonicity. There remains an indissoluble mystery concerning the canon. In the end it is not the church which decided, or may now decide the extent and limit of the canon: the New Testament documents forced themselves upon the church and do so still. We receive our Scripture not from the hand of the church but directly from the hand of Christ. The Saviour whose Spirit inspired them speaks through them still, and as he speaks presses his sovereign claims upon his people. The recognition of canon is the church bowing before the authority of the Saviour; it is an act of worship.

## 8. Practical Implications of Canon

The subject of the canon of Scripture is not some dry and dusty study, it is of great importance to us today. To assert that these writings which make up our Bible, these writings, the whole of these writings, and nothing but these writings is God's word for our lives is an immensely practical assertion. Having made such an assertion, with which I trust we are all in agreement, I wish to draw out some of its implications by means of five practical warnings.

1. Firstly, we need to beware of subtracting from the word of God. There are many today who call themselves Evangelicals but who do not accept the authority of the whole of the Scriptures, feeling free to dismiss certain parts with comments such as, "that was just the Old Testament", or even, "That was just Paul". To affirm the canon of Scripture is to affirm that all Scripture is profitable for us.

We too can be guilty of a similar error by our neglect of certain Scriptures. Conservative Evangelicals all too often develop what is practically a canon within a canon by highlighting certain passages or themes of Scripture which we consider to be of prime importance while other, equally prominent themes are neglected. This too is a subtraction from the word of God.

2. Secondly, we need to beware of adding to the word of God. Evangelicals have been strong on opposing the additions and traditions of the church of Rome but we have been weak in recognising our own additions. All too often we expect Christians to conform to particular evangelical but extra-biblical standards or lifestyle before they are acceptable to us. We need to be careful that our single demand is for conformity to the word of God. The cry, *Sola Scriptura* must be a cry for continual reformation both of our personal lives and for the corporate life of the church.

3. Thirdly, we need to beware of distorting the word of God. Scripture is self-authenticating and self-interpreting. Neither the church, the pastor nor the Christian has authority in themselves to declare what Scripture means. The Scriptures must so be expounded that they clearly speak for themselves and impress their own authority on the life of the people of God.

4. Fourthly, we must beware of depersonalising the Scriptures. The Bible is not "The rule book of the church". This is a wholly inadequate understanding of Scripture. Scripture is God's own testimony to his redemptive acts towards us centring in Jesus Christ. It is pre-eminently personal or interpersonal as God addresses us through his word and speaks to us. It is full of the glory of God in Christ. We speak of canon not as a set of rules for us but as the word which rules over us.

5. Fifthly and consequently, we must beware of the unmoved heart. This is not a book to be studied 'objectively' and in a disinterested manner. It is a book through which God speaks to our hearts and by which we must be moved. It is the word of the Lover to his beloved which captivates our hearts and will not let us go. Our proper response to the canon of Scripture is worship.

### **History**

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