Grace Theological Journal 11.1 (1991) 29–52

EVANGELICALS AND THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The conservative American evangelical apologetic for the shape of the New Testament canon has been historically the weakest link in its bibliology. Arguments for the shape of the canon have been built upon unexamined theological assumptions and historical inaccuracies. Contemporary evangelical apologists for the New Testament canon have downplayed the reformers' doctrine of the "witness of the Spirit" for assurance of the shape of the New Testament canon, appealing instead to historical evidences for the apostolicity of the New Testament documents and to a theological argument of providence for the closure of the New Testament canon in the fourth century. There are, however, methodological weaknesses with each of these appeals. It is suggested the evangelicals reassert the doctrine of the "witness of the Spirit" as a key feature in their apologetic for the New Testament canon rather than rely exclusively upon historical arguments.

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THE PROBLEM OF CANON DETERMINATION FOR EVANGELICALS

OVER the past two decades American evangelical scholarship has risen ably to the defense of the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible as a touchstone upholding the historic position of the Church of Jesus Christ with reference to its authority. While volumes have been penned discussing the nature of biblical inspiration and the consequent authority of the scripture, it seems curious that in all the bibliological discussions one crucial issue is scarcely mentioned: the issue of canon. Apart from R. Laird Harris's *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*,[1] Wilber T. Dayton's article, "Factors Promoting the Formation of the New Testament Canon,"[2] David Dunbar's chapter, "The Biblical

[1]R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969).

[2]Wilber T. Dayton, "Factors Promoting the Formation of the New Testament Canon," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10 (1967) 28–35.

Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*,[3] Geisler and Nix's discussion in their *General Introduction to the Bible*,[4] Merrill Tenney's chapter in his *New Testament Survey*,[5] and a recent series of articles in *Christianity Today*,[6] American evangelicals *who affirm the inerrancy* of Scripture[7] have had little to say concerning the shape of the canon.[8] The twenty-seven books which compose the New Testament scriptures together with the Jewish scriptures are assumed to be the complete written revelation of God to man without further comment or debate.

It has been charged that conservative evangelicalism's reticence to discuss the issue of canon is due to the fact that it "finds itself imprisoned within a 19th century biblicism *which believes that to question the canon is to undermine the authority of Scripture.*"[9] Outside the evangelical fold, the question of canon has been debated for decades with the discussion centering on the nature of canon itself. Emil Brunner has noted:

> . . . the question of canon has never, in principle, been definitely answered, but it is continually being reopened. Just as the church of the second, third and fourth centuries had the right to decide and felt

[3]Donald Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

[4]Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1971).

[5]Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961). Tenney's approach to canonicity mirrors closely that of Geisler and Nix, hence it is not treated separately.

[6]The February 5, 1988, issue of *Christianity Today* (32:2) included five brief articles covering different issues and perspectives on the subject of canon; Ronald Youngblood, "The Process: How We Got Our Bible"; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "The New Testament: How Do We Know for Sure?"; Klyne Snodgrass, "Providence Is Not Enough"; David G. Dunbar, "Why the Canon Still Rumbles"; Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Confidence in the Face of Confusion."

[7]Throughout this discussion the term "conservative Evangelical" is employed in the restricted sense of one who affirms the inerrancy of Scripture. More latitudinal Evangelicals have recently published significant works on the NT canon. Bruce Metzger's *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) is the most significant of these by an American, while British evangelical scholar F. F. Bruce has published *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988).

[8]Dayton's article "Factors Promoting the Formation of the New Testament Canon" is the one discussion which raises some of the same issues that concern me, but he focuses his attention in a different direction than this article.

[9]Richard Lyle Morgan, "Let's Be Honest About the Canon," *The Christian Century* 84:717 (May 31, 1967) (italics mine). This confounding of the issues of inspiration and canonicity occurs on both the conservative and liberal side of the theological spectrum. One need only remember that some of those who do not profess evangelical convictions attempt to prove that Luther did not hold to inerrancy since he questioned the canonicity of certain New Testament books.

> obliged to decide what was "Apostolic" and what was not, on their own responsibility as believers, so in the same way every Church, at every period in the history of the Church, possesses the same right and the same duty.[10]

While the issue could perhaps better be stated that the church in every generation has the responsibility before God to re-examine its foundations, the thrust of Brunner's comment is accurate. The question he raises is the question of the certainty of historical knowledge. The question has profound implications for the faith. How does the twentieth century believer know in fact and with certainty that his canon is the canon given by Jesus Christ?

I would propose that the evangelical approach to canon determination has historically been the weakest link in its bibliology. This weakness has persisted for several reasons. (1) Canon has not been a pressing issue of debate on the larger theological horizon. (2) It has been *assumed* that the canon of the New Testament was closed definitively in the fourth century. (3) Apostolicity has been assumed as the controlling issue because of the early mention of this feature by the Fathers. (4) The New Testament canon has been accepted uncritically because of the theological assumption that through divine providence the early church was led (infallibly) to its canonical decisions.

This discussion will address the question of the New Testament canon by (1) looking critically at the traditional inerrantist apologetic for the canon, (2) tracing briefly the development of the New Testament canon up through the Reformation, and (3) proposing an alternative method by which the believer is assured of the shape of the canon.

EVANGELICAL PROPOSALS ON CANON DETERMINATION

Conservative evangelical understanding of the criteria by which the New Testament books were recognized as canonical follows the basic outline laid down by B. B. Warfield and his fellow Princetonians, Charles and A. A. Hodge, over a century ago. These criteria focused exclusively upon the question of apostolicity. The unstated corollary of apostolicity was the conviction that divine providence had led the church to recognize all and only those books which were apostolic. An examination of Warfield as a principle architect, and of R. Laird Harris and Geisler and Nix as contemporary adherents demonstrate this outlook.

[10]Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946) 131.

B. B. Warfield

Warfield echoed the sentiment of the early church in stressing the primacy of apostolicity in canon determination.[11] He argued that *apostolicity* was a somewhat wider concept than strictly apostolic authorship, although in the early church these two issues were often confounded.[12] "The principle of canonicity was not apostolic authorship," contended Warfield, "but *imposition by the apostles as 'law'*."[13] The practical effect of this subtle distinction is to allow for the inclusion of books such as Mark, Luke, James, Jude and Hebrews which were not actually penned by the apostles, but were, according to tradition, written under apostolic sanction. Warfield asserted that the canon of Scripture was complete when the last book of the New Testament was penned by the apostle John.[14] From the divine standpoint the canon of Scripture was complete. However, human acceptance of an individual book of that canon hinged upon "*authenticating proof* of its apostolicity."[15] The key idea here is the concept of *apostolic law*. Scripture was authoritative because it was written by an apostle who imposed his writing upon the church in the same fashion as Torah was imposed upon Israel. As he stated,

> We rest our acceptance of the New Testament Scriptures as authoritative thus, not on the fact that they are the product of the revelation-age of the church, for so are many other books which we do not thus accept; but on the fact *that God's authoritative agents in founding the church gave them as authoritative to the church which they founded*. . . . It is clear that prophetic and apostolic origin is the very essence of the authority of the Scriptures.[16]

[11]F. F. Bruce surveys the concept of apostolicity in the early church and documents numerous occasions where this factor is mentioned as being a primary criterion in canon determination. He also mentions other issues related to apostolicity which were mentioned by some patristic writers as offering evidence that a book was indeed canonical (*The Canon of Scripture*, 256-69, esp. 256-58). R. Laird Harris, surveying the same material, insists that the sole criterion was apostolic authorship (*Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, 219-45, esp. 244-45).

[12]B. B. Warfield, "The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament," *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927. Reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981) 455.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Warfield argued here for a date of ca. A.D. 98 (ibid.), but since Domitian died in A.D. 96 contemporary evangelical scholarship would make this date ca. A.D. 95.

[15]Ibid. (italics mine).

[16]B. B. Warfield, "Review of A. W. Deickhoff, *Das Gepredigte Wort und die Heilge Schrift and Das Wort Gottes*," *The Presbyterian Review* 10 (1890) 506.

The fact that these manuscripts were hand-copied, coupled with the lack of modern methods of travel, made the slow collection of the manuscripts a foregone conclusion.

> The problem for the church today, as Warfield admitted, is that we cannot at this day hear the apostolic voice in its [a New Testament book's] authorization. Beyond the witness one apostolic book was to bear to another—as Paul in 1 Timothy 5:18 authenticates Luke—and what witness an apostolic book may bear to itself, we cannot appeal at this day to immediate apostolic authorization.[17]

To answer the question of canonicity, Warfield took as a test case the Second Epistle of Peter, a book whose canonicity had been repeatedly doubted over the centuries, and proceeded to investigate the provenance of the epistle to *prove* its canonicity. He asserted that if one demonstrated that the letter was old enough to have been written by an apostle and that the church had from the beginning held the book to be an authoritative rule of faith, then "the presumption is overwhelming that the church from the apostolic age held it to be divine only because it had received it from the apostles as divine."[18] Having completed his external proof, Warfield then examined critical objections to Petrine authorship based primarily upon internal evidence to see if indeed the critical were valid. The objections Warfield dealt with were six. (1) Peter's name was frequently forged in the ancient church. (2) The external support of 2 Peter is insufficient. (3) The epistle plainly has borrowed largely from Jude, which by some was judged unworthy of an apostle, while others held this to be a proof that 2 Peter belongs to the second century, due to the assumed lack of genuineness of Jude. (4) The author exhibits too great a desire to make himself out to be Peter. (5) The author betrays that he wrote in a later time by numerous anachronisms. (6) The style of 2 Peter is too divergent from that of 1 Peter to have been written by the same individual.[19] In typical style, Warfield concluded:

> The state of the argument, then, really is this: a mountain mass of presumption in favor of the genuineness and canonicity of 2 Peter, to be raised and overturned only by a very strong lever of rebutting evidence; a pitiable show of rebutting evidence offered as a lever. It is doubtless true that we can move the world if the proper lever and fulcrum be given.

[17]B. B. Warfield, "The Canonicity of Second Peter," in *The Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield-II*, ed. John Meeter (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 48–49.

[18]Ibid., 49.

[19]Ibid., 73–74.

> But if the lever is a common quarryman's tool and the fulcrum thin air! The woe to the man who wields it. What can such rebutting evidence as we have here really injure, except his own cause?[20]

Having dismissed the critical objections, he concluded that the book was genuine and that to question its canonicity is to lead the Church astray into heresy.[21]

Warfield's argument is closely reasoned. He refuted arguments of his opponents by showing their inadequate basis and contradictory presuppositions. However, even his colleague and friend at Princeton, Francis Landy Patton, in eulogizing Warfield noted that the rationalism of Warfield's system of logic was built upon probability which *precluded the absolute certainty of his conclusions.*[22]

R. Laird Harris

Harris's 1957 work, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, revised in 1969, was among the first in recent years to address seriously the question of the canon from a conservative evangelical perspective. Harris follows Warfield closely in insisting upon apostolic authorship as *the* criterion for New Testament canonicity.[23] He goes beyond Warfield by denying that the Reformation principle of the witness of the Spirit is a valid test of canonicity of a book of Scripture.[24] Harris painstakingly demonstrates that the crucial question for the early church was, "Was the work written by an apostle?" To answer this question he deduces numerous quotations from the ancient fathers which attest the apostolic authorship of the New Testament books.

To answer the question of the presence of books which make no claim to apostolic authorship, he asserts that such books were written by disciples of the apostles who carefully reproduced their master's teaching. With reference to Mark, Harris notes the ancient tradition connecting the second gospel with the Apostle Peter: ". . . Papias explicitly states that the second Gospel is accepted because of Peter, not because of Mark."[25] Harris concluded:

> It appears that Mark and Luke were not mere second-generation disciples who followed their masters in time and wrote what they pleased, but were disciples who followed the teachings of their masters in such a way that they presented their masters' teachings, and their production had

[20]Ibid., 78.

[21]Ibid., 79.

[22]F. L. Patton, "Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield," *The Princeton Theological Review* 19 (1921) 369–91.

[23]This corresponds to the requirement of prophetic authorship as the requirement for canonicity of an OT book.

[24]Harris, *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, 292–93.

[25]Ibid., 239–40.

> their masters' authority. . . . We are reminded of Tertullian's use of the phrase "apostolic men," referring to Mark and Luke. In both cases it should be noted that these are not mere companions of the apostles but are, as it were, assistants, understudies, who reproduced their masters' teachings. . . . Quite clearly Mark and Luke are not authoritative in their own right; rather they are authoritative because of their adherence to their apostolic masters.[26]

With reference to the book of Hebrews, Harris cites the early traditions which ascribe the work to Paul, noting that the lack of that apostle's characteristic salutation was, according to Pantaenus, due to the fact that Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, rather than the apostle to the Hebrews. He notes, too, the statement of Clement that the epistle had been composed in Hebrew and then translated into Greek by Luke.[27] This early testimony notwithstanding, Harris denies Pauline authorship to the book of Hebrews because the author of the epistle himself claims to be a second generation believer (Heb 2:3–4). But having said this he asserts that, "No apostle other than Paul is seriously mentioned in connection with the writing of Hebrews."[28]

So committed is Harris to the proposition of apostolic authorship, that having noted the fact that the author himself claims to be a *second generation believer*, not of the apostolic inner circle, he then notes that wherever the epistle was accepted as canonical "it was accepted into the canon only in those places . . . where it was considered to be a genuine work of Paul. Appeal was not made to its antiquity nor to the testimony of the Holy Spirit, nor to any other auxiliary reason. Authorship was what was decisive."[29]

Harris recognizes the dilemma in which this position places him. If the book is not Pauline in *authorship*, should it be excised from the canon? His previous judgment notwithstanding, he proposes that the book *was* written by Paul employing Barnabas as his amanuensis.[30] "This would at once explain the unquestioned acceptance (no other anonymous work was so accepted), variation in style from Paul's, the anonymity where the details of authorship were not known and only the style problem appeared, and the double tradition of authorship in other circles."[31]

While he seriously proposes the Paul-Barnabas authorship of Hebrews, he recognizes that this cannot be proven beyond the shadow of a doubt, and allows that there may have been some other amanuensis. Even so, the basic thrust of the argument remains the same.

[26]Ibid., 244.
[27]Ibid., 264.
[28]Ibid., 266.
[29]Ibid., 268.
[30]Ibid., 269.
[31]Ibid., 269–70.

Apostolicity in the strict sense remains the governing criterion for acceptance into the canon.

Geisler and Nix

Norman Geisler and William Nix evidence a widening of the very narrow position adopted by Harris. Taking a different starting point than Warfield and Harris, they assert that canonicity is determined by God. Humans do not determine canon; they merely discover the already existent canon which God has given. The key concept in the discovery of canonicity was the recognition of a book's inspiration by God.[32] In addition, canonicity is seen as being inexorably linked to authenticity. While Harris made apostolicity the sole criterion for the church's subjective determination of the already existent objective canon, Geisler and Nix propose five principles which guided the ancient church in its discovery of canon. It should be noted that these five principles involve assumption on their part. There is no documentation from patristic sources that these principles were *consciously* employed.

The first of these principles is that of *authority*. Specifically, this criterion looks at the book itself and asks the question, "Does it have a self-vindicating authority that commands attention as it communicates?"[33] Many books were either rejected or doubted because the voice of God was not heard clearly.

The second test for canonicity was that of the *prophetic* nature of the book. Whereas the former test looked at the book itself, this test looked at authorship. " . . . A book was judged as to whether or not it was genuinely written by the stated author who was a spokesman in the mainstream of redemptive revelation, either a prophet (whether in Old or New Testament times) or an apostle."[34] This criterion evidences a loosening of the principle of apostolicity which Harris asserts, since Geisler and Nix would include New Testament prophets (presumably Mark, Luke, James, Jude, the author of Hebrews). By this test all pseudonymous writings and forgeries are to be rejected.[35]

The third test for canonicity which Geisler and Nix contend was operational in the early church was that of *authenticity*. By authenticity is meant authenticity of doctrine rather than authorship. This test would compare the teachings of any book vying for entrance into the

[32]Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 133.

[33]Ibid., 138. This criterion is akin to the Reformed doctrine of the *autopistie* of Scripture.

[34]Ibid., 139.

[35]Ibid., 140. Geisler and Nix are careful to point out that pseudonymity adopted as a *literary device* would not exclude a book from the canon. The case in point here would be the book of Ecclesiastes in which many understand the author to have written autobiographically as though he were Solomon. Such a device would in their view be allowable since it involved no moral deception.

canon with the doctrine of the already accepted books. Since truth cannot contradict truth, if the book under consideration was found to be at variance with the rest of the canon it would automatically be rejected as non-canonical.

The fourth test was one of *power*. "Does the book come with the power of God?" Since the Word of God was living and active and it was profitable for edification, if a book was not viewed as achieving this goal it was rejected.[36]

The fifth and final test was its *reception*: Was it generally accepted by the orthodox church? This they admit "is rather a confirmation, and does serve the obvious purpose of *making final* the decision and availability of the books."[37]

While Warfield consciously addressed the problem of history and the problems involved in certainty of historical knowledge, Geisler and Nix seem implicitly to appeal to the authority of the early church in determining the shape of the New Testament canon. Their appeal to inspiration as the controlling factor and the five principles which they propose guided the ancient church in reaching its decisions as to what books were in fact inspired seem to have little relation to the present. The decision was made by the ancient church and stands today without question.

Weaknesses of the Evangelical View

Whether the criterion be inspiration, apostolicity or something else, I believe that we must acknowledge the *a posteriori* nature of the methods of canon determination which have been proposed. Ridderbos appropriately has noted:

> As their artificiality indicates, these arguments are a posteriori in character. To hold that the church was led to accept these writings by such *criteria*, in fact speak here of a *criteria canonicitais* is to go too far. It is rather clear that we have to do with more or less successful attempts to *cover* with arguments what had already been fixed for a long time and for the fixation of which, such reasoning or such criteria had never been employed.[38]

He also stated that "the church did not begin by making formal decisions as to what was valid as canon, nor did it begin by setting specific criteria of canonicity."[39] Brevard Childs concurs in this assessment noting, "It is hard to escape the impression that the later expositions of the criteria of canonicity were, in large part, after-the-fact

[36]Ibid., 142.

[37]Ibid., 143.

[38]Herman Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1963) 45–46.

[39]Ibid., 44.

explanations of the church's experience of faith in Jesus Christ which were evoked by the continued use of certain books."[40]

The real problem of these *a posteriori* explanations is that they inject another level of canon into the discussion. As Ridderbos contended: "Every attempt to find an a posteriori element to justify the canon, whether sought in the authority of its doctrine or in the consensus of the church that gradually developed goes beyond the canon itself, and thereby posits a canon above the canon which comes in conflict with the nature of canon itself."[41]

The questions of inspiration and apostolicity must be briefly addressed. Geisler and Nix, as noted above, make inspiration a criterion for canonicity. While I do not dispute the truth of this statement, I contend that it is inadequate and does not solve the problem. The concept of writing under inspiration was common (albeit not universal) in the ancient church.[42] Clement makes this claim for his epistle to the Corinthians.[43] Clement does not use the Pauline term θεόπνευστος but does state variously, " . . . the things we have written through the Holy Spirit (γεγράμμενοις διὰ τοῦ αγίου πνεύματος)" (63:2) and "to the words which have been spoken by Him (Jesus Christ) through us" (59:1). Even Eusebius makes the claim for his *Life of Constantine.*[44] Yet, neither Clement nor Eusebius claim that their writings have the authority of Scripture. My point here is not to argue that Clement or Eusebius were or were not inspired, but that the criterion of inspiration, as it is understood today, for canonicity was not *consciously* employed by the ancient church.[45] With reference to the claim of apostolicity, we must admit that the apostles wrote more documents than have been preserved for us (e.g., a lost letter of Paul to Corinth) which evidently bore the full weight of their apostolic authority. While we may argue that these documents were not inspired and were, therefore, not preserved, from a strictly logical point of view, we merely beg the question. Thus, while either of these two criteria alone or both together can

[40]Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 33.

[41]Ridderbos, 39.

[42]For a more detailed discussion of the concept of "inspiration" or writing under the leading or influence of the Holy Spirit in the ancient church see Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 266–67.

[43]1 Clement 63:2; 59:1.

[44]Life of Constantine 1.11.2. Here Eusebius invokes the inspiring aid of the heavenly Word as he writes. For a fuller discussion of the concept of inspiration in the early church see Sundberg, "The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration," *Interpretation* 29 (1975) 365–70.

[45]See Thomas A. Hoffman, "Inspiration, Normativeness, Canonicity, and the Unique Sacred Character of the Bible," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982) 457–58.

contribute to our assurance as to the shape of the New Testament canon, they fail to *fully* answer the question at hand.

If we insist upon apostolicity as *the* means by which we are assured that our twenty-seven book New Testament is in fact the canon of Jesus Christ, as did Warfield and Harris, ultimately we are forced to rely upon the "assured results of higher criticism" for the certainty of our Scriptures, since even as Warfield noted, "We cannot this day hear the apostolic voice in its authorization." Ridderbos rightly contends "an historical judgment cannot be the final and the sole ground for the acceptance of the New Testament as canonical by the church. To do so would mean that the church would base its faith on the results of historical investigation."[46]

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Discussions of canon tend to develop in one of two directions depending upon the definition of canon adopted by the theologian. Warfield and Geisler and Nix adopt a *material* definition and stress the objective existence of a God-given standard, which exists by virtue of its divine inspiration. In this sense canon emphasizes the inherent authority of the writing. The second type of discussion, taking its clue from the original usage of the term "canon," stresses the *formal* development of the canon in the sense of a completed list, an authoritative collection, a closed collection to which nothing can be added.[47]

The question of whether the canon is a "collection of authoritative books" or an "authoritative collection of books" hinges on what definition of canon one adopts. If one argues that the individual writings are canonical because of their divine inspiration, then he would logically see the canon as a collection of authoritative books. If, on the other hand, one views the canon in the sense of a completed list to which nothing can be added, he would tend to see the canon as an authoritative collection. However, I believe that at this point, to be consistent, one would have to admit that the authority of the *collection* is imposed by ecclesiastical authority.

The common evangelical view of the development of the New Testament canon views the canon as having arisen gradually and through usage rather than through conciliar pronouncement *which*

[46]Ridderbos, 36. He also argues that the judgment of the early church is an insufficient ground for accepting a book as canonical: " . . . it is equally obvious that a posteriori the *historical judgment of the church* as to what is not apostolic can never be the final basis for the acceptance of the New Testament as holy and canonical" (p. 35).

[47]Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, notes that the term *canon* had both a *material* and a *formal* sense.

vested the books of the New Testament with some kind of authority. Athanasius' festal letter (A.D. 367) is generally viewed as the document which fixed the canon in the east and the decision of the Council of Carthage in the west is viewed as having fixed the Latin canon. Youngblood summarizes this position:

> The earliest known recognition of the 27 books of the New Testament as alone canonical, to which nothing is to be added and from which nothing is to be subtracted, is the list preserved by Athanasius (A.D. 367). The synod of Hippo (A.D. 393) and the Third Synod of Carthage (A.D. 397) duly acquiesced, again probably under the influence of the redoubtable Augustine.[48]

He concludes: "The closing of the two canons and their amalgamation into one are historical watersheds that it would be presumptuous to disturb."[49]

Evangelicals insist upon the primacy of the written documents of Scripture over and against all human authority. However, in so doing they tend to overlook the fact that other authority did in fact exist in the ancient church, particularly the authority of Jesus Christ and His apostles. They often fail to appreciate that the church was founded not upon the apostolic documents, but rather upon the apostolic doctrine. The church existed at least a decade before the earliest book of the New Testament was penned, and possibly as long as six decades until the New Testament was completed. But during this period it was not without authority. Its standard, its canon, was ultimately Jesus Christ Himself,[50] and mediately His apostles. Even in the immediate post-apostolic period we find a great stress on apostolic *tradition* alongside a written New Testament canon.[51]

As the apostles died, this living stream of tradition diminished. The written documents became progressively more important to the ongoing life of the church. The question of competing authorities in the sense of written and oral tradition subsided. However, even as late as the mid-second century we find an emphasis on oral tradition which stands *in some way parallel* to the written gospels as authoritative.

[48]Youngblood, 27.

[49]Ibid., 28.

[50]Andrew F. Walls, "The Canon of the New Testament," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) 632–33.

[51]In the NT itself we find on occasion the preference for a personal visit over a letter. Paul declares his desire to be with the Galatians (Galatians 4). In other places we find this same mentality (e.g., 1 Thess 3). On other occasions a letter was preferable to a personal visit, e.g., 1 Corinthians. See F. F. Bruce, "Some Thoughts on the Development of the New Testament Canon," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983) 39.

There was a problem in knowing how to sort out which tradition was genuine and which was spurious. The answer, proposed by Papias, was that a tradition which was traceable to the apostles themselves was regarded as genuine. Eusebius quotes Papias as declaring:

> But I shall not hesitate to put down for you along with my interpretation whatsoever things I have at any time learned carefully from the elders and carefully remembered, guaranteeing their truth. For I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those that speak much, but in those that teach the truth; not in those that relate strange commandments, but in those who deliver the commandments given by the Lord to faith and springing to truth itself. If then any one came, who had been a follower of the elders,—what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the Presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord say. For I did not think that what was to be gotten out of books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice.[52]

Theo Donner objects to the interpretation of Papias' words which would make him downplay the importance of the written Scripture. He insists that Papias was "relying on oral tradition only for his commentary on the words of the Lord, not for the actual content of the words."[53] McGiffert notes that Papias' statement should not be interpreted to mean that Papias' faith was in oral tradition as opposed to written tradition, but that the oral tradition supplemented the written tradition.[54] In his following discussion of Papias, Eusebius notes that Papias preserved heretofore unwritten tradition of the words of Christ on the authority of Aristion and John the elder.[55] The point here is that at this period the two, written and oral tradition, existed side by side.

The concept of an authoritative Christian tradition can be traced back into the New Testament itself. Paul speaks of the chain of receiving and delivering a body of teaching.[56] It is, therefore, not surprising to see in this early period both written works and oral tradition existing side by side in some sort of authoritative fashion.

[52]Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.3–4, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2d ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. A. C. McGiffert, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 171.

[53]Theo Donner, "Some Thoughts on the History of the New Testament Canon," *Themelios* 7:3 (April 1981) 25.

[54]Eusebius, *The Church History of Eusebius*, trans. by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, NPNF, 2nd series (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951) 1:171n5.

[55]Ibid., 172.

[56]E.g., 2 Tim 2:2; 1 Cor 11:23.

Without doubt, the earliest Bible for the Church consisted of the Old Testament scriptures, interpreted Christologically. Additionally, in the New Testament itself we find at least one case of some New Testament books being placed on a par with the Old Testament. In 2 Pet 3:16 the apostle makes reference to the ignorant and unstable who twist the letters of Paul "to their own destruction as they do the rest of Scripture." The second occurrence is 1 Tim 5:18 where the author coordinates a quotation from Deut 25:4 ("Do not muzzle the ox while he is treading out the grain") with a citation from Luke 10:7 ("The laborer deserves his wages"), citing both as Scripture. This probably indicates that even at this early date the writings of the apostles were viewed in some circles as being on a par with the Old Testament.[57] However, F. F. Bruce has contended, "such hints would not necessarily indicate a new corpus of sacred scripture: if Paul's letters are reckoned along with 'the other scriptures' in 2 Pet 3:16, that might in itself imply their addition to the Old Testament writings, perhaps in kind of an appendix, rather than the emergence of a new and distinct canon."[58]

The earliest solid evidence we find of a New Testament canon, in the sense of an authoritative collection of writings, comes not from the hand of the orthodox church with its apostolic tradition, but from the second century heretic, Marcion. It was in part this heretical threat which impelled the church to come to grips with the extent of its authoritative writings. The earliest evidence we possess of a canonical collection of books by the ancient church is the Muratorian Canon, dated in the mid to late second century.

Another factor which affected the formation of the New Testament canon was theological. The Montanist movement, with its claim to a continuing prophetic revelation, relied heavily upon the Apocalypse.[59] This provoked a reaction of mistrust in prophetic literature in the ancient church particularly with reference to the Apocalypse.[60] The orthodox church of Syria, from this point forward, rejected the Apocalypse, although it had earlier looked upon the book with favor.[61]

[57]In a recent study on p^{46} Young Kyu Kim has argued on calligraphic grounds that the papyrus, which contains ten of the Pauline epistles plus the book of Hebrews should be dated before the late first century reign of Domitian ("Paleographic Dating of p^{46} to the Later First Century," *Biblica* 69 [1988] 254). If correct this would argue even more strongly for the authority of the apostolic writings in the early church.

[58]Bruce, "Some Thoughts on the Development of the New Testament Canon," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983) 39.

[59]For a fuller discussion of Montanism's influence in the formation of the canon see Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 99–106.

[60]Ibid., 104.

[61]Ibid., 119; cf. W. G. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 17th rev. ed., trans. H. C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 502–3.

Evidently, this was a situation where the apostolic tradition was looked to in adjudging the heterodox nature of the Montanist position. In an attempt to discredit this position, parts of the ancient church were not averse to denying books it had previously approved, in order to cut the ground out from under the heterodox.[62]

The production of Tatian's *Diatessaron* must be considered in the process of the development of the canonization of the New Testament. Tatian, a pupil of Justin Martyr, took the four canonical gospels and from them composed a harmony (c. 170). This work supplanted the canonical gospels in the Syrian church well into the fifth century, at which time the hierarchy made a concerted effort to stamp out the work and restore the four canonical gospels to their rightful place within the canon.[63]

Yet another factor which affected the collection of the books into a coherent collection was the introduction of the codex as it replaced the scroll. Bruce notes, "The nearly simultaneous popularization of the codex and the publication of the fourfold gospel may have been coincidental; on the other hand, one of the two may have had some influence on the other."[64]

The Festal letter of Athanasius (c. A.D. 367) is well known as the first list to contain all and only the present twenty-seven book New Testament Canon. Thirty years later the Synod of Carthage, under the influence of the great Augustine, reached a similar conclusion. Youngblood gives the common Protestant evaluation of these pronouncements:

> Thus led (as we believe) by divine Providence, scholars during the latter half of the fourth century settled for all time the limits of the New Testament canon. The 27 books of Matthew through Revelation constitute that New Testament, which possesses divine authority equal to that of the Old.[65]

The problem with such a sweeping assertion is that it does not fit the historical facts. First, the synods of Hippo and Carthage were not ecumenical councils, but local assemblies whose decisions held sway only in the local sees. The Festal letter of Athanasius, to be sure, gives us the judgment of a key figure of the ancient church, but it did not

[62]See Metzger, 105.

[63]J. A. Lamb, "The Place of the Bible in the Liturgy," in *the Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 567.

[64]Bruce, "Some Thoughts," 49.

[65]Youngblood, "The Process, How We Got Our Bible," *Christianity Today*, 32:2 (February 5, 1988) 27.

bind even the Eastern Church.[66] The ancient church *never* reached the conscious and binding decision as to the extent of canon. Proof of this fact can be seen in the canons of the various churches of the ancient world.

While the canon in the west proved to be relatively stable from the late fourth century, the canon in the oriental churches varied, sometimes widely. The Syriac church at the beginning of the fifth century employed only the *Diatessaron* (in place of the four gospels), Acts, and the Pauline epistles.[67] During the fourth or fifth century the *Peshitta* was produced and became the standard Syriac version. In it the *Diatessaron* was replaced by the four gospels, 3 Corinthians was removed and three Catholic epistles, James, 1 Peter and 1 John were included. The Apocalypse and the other Catholic epistles were excluded, making a twenty-two book canon. The remaining books did not make their way into the Syriac canon until the late sixth century with the appearance of the Harclean Syriac Version.[68] While the Syrian church recognized an abbreviated canon, the Ethiopic Church recognized the twenty-seven books of the New Testament plus *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *1 & 2 Clement* and eight books of the *Apostolic Constitutions*.[69]

Even in the west the canon was not closed as tightly as commonly believed. A case in point is the apocryphal Epistle to the Laodiceans. In the tenth century, Alfric, later Archbishop of Canterbury, lists the work as among the canonical Pauline epistles. Westcott observed that the history of this epistle "forms one of the most interesting episodes in the literary history of the Bible."[70] He noted that from the sixth century onward Laodiceans occurs frequently in Latin manuscripts, including many of which were prepared for church use. So common was the epistle in the Medieval period, it passed into several vernacular translations, including the Bohemian Bible as late as 1488. It also occurred in the Albigensian Version of Lyons, and, while not translated by Wycliffe personally, it was added to several manuscripts of his translation of the New Testament.[71]

[66]Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 215, notes that while there was a basic unity of content in the East, their canons still reflected a diversity for centuries after Athanasius.

[67]The Catholic epistles and the Apocalypse were omitted. Hebrews, viewed as Pauline, was accepted, while Philemon was either unknown or rejected. The fourth century Syrian fathers included 3 Corinthians as canonical (W. G. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 502).

[68]Ibid.

[69]Ibid. The Ethiopic version is dated as early as the fourth century by some. Others would attribute it to the seventh century (Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 2d ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1968] 84).

[70]B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 3d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1870) 426.

[71]Ibid., 429. Cf. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 238–40.

On the eve of the Reformation, Luther was not alone in having problems with the extent of the New Testament canon. Doubts were being expressed by loyal sons of the Church. Luther's opponent at Augsburg, Cardinal Cajetan, following Jerome, expressed doubts concerning the canonicity of Hebrews, James, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. Of the latter three he stated, "They are of less authority than those which are certainly Holy Scripture."[72] Erasmus likewise expressed doubts concerning Revelation as well as the apostolicity of James, Hebrews and 2 Peter. It was only as the Protestant Reformation progressed, and as Luther's willingness to excise books from the canon threatened Rome that, at Trent, the Roman Catholic Church hardened its consensus stand on the extent of the New Testament canon into a conciliar pronouncement.[73]

The point of this survey has been to demonstrate that the New Testament canon was not closed in the fourth century. Debates continued concerning the fringe books of the canon until the Reformation. During the Reformation, both the Reformed and Catholic Churches independently asserted the twenty-seven book New Testament canon. Youngblood asserts that the canon was closed by providence and we have no right to question that closure. The problem with his assertion is that it is an extra-biblical pronouncement to which, apparently, the theological equivalent of canonical authority is being given.[74] While it is proper to argue that divine providence *did* superintend the collection of the New Testament canon, we cannot equate providence with the belief of the majority. If this were true, we should all be Roman Catholics today! As Klyne Snodgrass has asserted, "Providence is not enough."[75] The problem of an appeal to *providence* for support of an argument is that there is no objective criterion by which one is to judge what is and is not providential. One's place in history can radically affect his interpretation of an event or process. A chilling example of this phenomenon is seen in the "German Christians'" response to the rise of Adolf Hitler. The "German Christians" spoke of the "Lord of History" who was at that moment in Germany's history speaking in a clear voice. It led a group of theologians at Wurtemburg to declare in 1934:

> We are full of thanks to God that He as Lord of history, has given us Adolf Hitler, our leader and savior from our difficult lot. We acknowledge that we, with body and soul, are bound and dedicated to the

[72]Ibid., 443.

[73]It is significant that the early Lutheran Confessions did not contain a list of the canonical writings.

[74]See Ridderbos, 39.

[75]Klyne Snodgrass, "Providence is Not Enough," *Christianity Today*, 32:2 (February 5, 1988) 33.

> German state and to its Fuhrer. This bondage and duty contains for us, as evangelical Christians, its deepest and most holy significance in its obedience to the command of God.[76]

Rather than focus solely upon the external criteria of apostolicity, inspiration or providence for our assurance that our present twenty-seven book New Testament canon is indeed the canon of Jesus Christ, there is a better way for us to approach the problem. This way is not new but is a return to and recognition of the Reformers' doctrine of the *witness of the Spirit* and the *self-authenticating nature of Scripture for us today.*

THE *AUTOPISTIE* OF SCRIPTURE AND THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

Discomfort with the traditional conservative evangelical apologetic for the canon is not new. A century ago this became a central focus of Charles Briggs' attack on the Princetonian bibliology.[77] More recently, Ridderbos has argued that the common apologetic for canon ultimately leads a person to one of two alternatives, a certainty based upon what amounts to be "assured results of higher criticism," or the infallibility of the church.[78] For the evangelical Protestant neither of these alternatives is ultimately satisfying.

Ridderbos and Briggs both build their rationale for canon recognition upon the Reformers, arguing that the *autopistie* of the writings themselves objectively, and the witness of the Spirit subjectively, form the proper matrix through which we should view the shape of the canon.[79] Shifting the means of our *certainty* of the form of the canon

[76]Cited in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 162-63.

[77]See this writer's Th.D. dissertation, "Charles Augustus Briggs and Tensions in Late Nineteenth Century American Theology" (Dallas Theology Seminary, 1987) 214-27. While Briggs' name is infamous as a convicted heretic and he did indeed deny the inerrancy of Scripture, his doctrine of canon was never challenged as being heterodox, even by his greatest theological foe, B. B. Warfield.

[78]David G. Dunbar has objected that Ridderbos too easily lumps Protestant appeals to divine providence in guiding the church's recognition of the canon together with Roman Catholic claims of ecclesiastical infallibility. "To be sure, there is a formal similarity, but materially there is a great difference in the theological program here at work. . . ." ("The Biblical Canon," *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986] 355). I would agree that there is a difference between an appeal to an infallible Pope or hierarchy and to consensus. However, the question still remains if indeed the "leading of the Lord" does not ultimately vest some kind of infallible authority in the consensus of the church.

[79]F. F. Bruce asserts apostolicity as a valid objective criterion for determining canonicity, but goes on to assert the "self authenticating authority" of the NT books (*The Canon of Scripture*, 276-77). This criterion is akin if not identical to Briggs' *autopistie* of the Scripture.

from the objective external criterion of apostolicity alone in no way should imply down-playing the importance of this factor as a *ground* of canon. Rather, as Warfield and Ridderbos both have noted, no book of the New Testament *as we possess it* contains a certificate of authentication as to its apostolic origin. That is, from our perspective, separated by nearly two millennia from the autographa, we cannot rely upon such means as the known signature of the apostle Paul to assure a book's authenticity. Hence, we cannot use apostolicity as the means by which we are *ultimately* assured of the shape of the canon. The same can be said for the criterion of prophetic authorship, unless we merely beg the question and assert that the book itself is evidence that its author was a prophet.

The starting point of canonicity must be a recognition that *at the most basic level it is the risen Lord Himself who is ultimately the canon of His church.*[80] As Ridderbos has observed:

> The very ground or basis for the recognition of the canon is therefore, in principle, redemptive-historical, i.e., Christological. For Christ himself is not only the canon in which God comes to the world, but Christ establishes the canon and gives it its concrete historical form.[81]

It is also the risen Christ who causes His church to accept the canon and to recognize it by means of the witness of the Holy Spirit.[82] However, this does not relieve the believer individually or the church corporately of the responsibility of examining the history of the canon, nor does it give us the right to identify *absolutely* the canon which comes from Jesus Christ (i.e., the material canon) with the canon of the church (i.e., the formal canon). As Ridderbos has said, "the absoluteness of the canon cannot be separated from the relativity of history."[83] In short, the church confesses that its Lord has given an *objective* standard of authority; for our purposes today that consists of the written documents. But we must also recognize that, due to sinfulness, insensitivity or misunderstanding, it is possible for us *subjectively* to

[80]It might be objected here that the earliest church did have a written canon, that of the Old Testament. While this is true, it was the OT *interpreted Christologically* by the Lord Himself and His Apostles. Thus, the risen Jesus Christ was the standard, the canon, by which even the OT was measured. Metzger has cogently argued the OT was not the ultimate authority in the infant church, rather it was Jesus Christ. The apostles did not preach the OT but rather bore witness to the Person and Work of Jesus Christ who had come to bring the OT to fulfillment (Mark 5:17). See Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (New York: Abingdon, 1965) 274.

[81]Ridderbos, 40.

[82]Ibid., 41.

[83]Ibid.

fail to recognize properly the objective canon Christ has given. We may include a book which does not belong, or exclude a book which does belong.

How then are we to determine what properly belongs to the canon? Is it "every man for himself"? Charles Briggs has proposed a viable method for us to consider today, a method which balances and supplements the objective historical evidence with *immediate* divine testimony. Following the Reformers he proposed *a threefold program for canon determination* built upon the "rock of the Reformation principle of the Sacred Scriptures."[84] The *first* principle in canon determination was *the testimony of the church*. By examining tradition and the early written documents, he contended that *probable* evidence could be presented to men that the scriptures "recognized as of divine authority and canonical by such general consent are indeed what they are claimed to be."[85]

With reference to the Protestant canon this evidence was, he believed, unanimous. This evidence was not determinative, however. It was only "probable." It was the evidence of general consent, although given under the providential leading of the Spirit. It was from this general consent that conciliar pronouncements were made. It did not, however, settle the issue, since divine authority could not be derived from ecclesiastical pronouncement or consensus. The *second and next higher level* of evidence was that of *the character of the scriptures themselves*. This is the Reformers' doctrine of the *autopistie* of the scriptures. Their character was pure and holy, having a beauty, harmony and majesty. The scriptures also breathed piety and devotion to God; they revealed redemption and satisfied the spiritual longing within the soul of man. All these features served to convince that the scriptures were indeed the very Word of God. As Briggs stated, "If men are not won by the holy character of the biblical books, it must be because for some reason their eyes have been withheld from seeing it."[86] It is in light of this concept that we should understand the Syriac church's rejection of the Apocalypse and Luther's rejection of the book of James. In both cases there was a pressing theological reason which kept them from seeing the divine fingerprints upon specific books of the New Testament. In a very real sense it was their zeal for the truth of the apostolic faith/gospel which blinded them.[87]

[84]Charles A. Briggs, *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899) 163.

[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid., 165.

[87]See Geoffrey Wainwright, "The New Testament as Canon," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975) 554. Cf. also R. Grant, "Literary Criticism and the New Testament Canon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 16 (1982) 39.

The *third and highest principle* of canon determination was that of *the witness of the Spirit.*[88] The *witness of the Spirit* was to be distinguished from the providential leading of the Spirit in history in that the latter was external to the individual whereas the former involved the individual directly. Briggs stated, "The Spirit of God bears witness by and with the particular writing . . . in the heart of the believer, removing every doubt and assuring the soul of its possession of the truth of God."[89]

Briggs saw the witness of the Spirit as threefold. As noted earlier, the Spirit bore witness to the particular writing. Secondly, the Spirit bore witness "by and with the several writings in such a manner as to assure the believer"[90] that they were each a part of the one divine revelation. This argument was cumulative. As one recognized one book as divine, it became easier to recognize the same marks in another of the same character. A systematic study of the scriptures yielded a conviction of the fact that the canon was an organic whole. The Holy Spirit illumined the mind and heart to perceive this organic whole and thus gave certainty to the essential place of each writing in the Word of God.[91] This factor became very important for Calvin in his discussion of the canonicity of 2 Peter. He saw in the epistle nothing that was in conflict with the other Scriptures which he did accept. This became significant in his acceptance of the epistle as canonical despite reservations concerning its style. "For Calvin properly would have us understand not only that such books were accepted by the church from ancient times but also that they contain nothing which is in conflict with the remainder of Scripture, which was never contested in any way. Is not an important truth to be found, with respects (sic) to the limitations of the canon, in the statement: *Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpres?*"[92]

Third, the Spirit bore witness "to the church as an organized body of believers, through their free consent in their various communities and countries to the unity and variety of the . . . Scriptures as the complete and perfect canon."[93] This line of evidence was a reworking of the historical argument but strengthening it with the "vital argument of the divine evidence."[94] Whereas before, the church testimony was

[88]This third step is the *highest* level since it is built upon the previous two steps. The witness of the Spirit should not be construed as being opposed to the first two steps but operating in conjunction with them.

[89]Briggs, *General Introduction*, 165.

[90]Ibid.

[91]Ibid., 163.

[92]Ridderbos, 51.

[93]Briggs, *General Introduction*, 166.

[94]Ibid.

external and formal, whenever we come to recognize the Holy Spirit as the guiding force in the Church in both the formation and recognition of the canon, "then we may know that the testimony of the Church is the testimony of divine Spirit speaking through the Church."[95]

Focusing on the principle of the witness of the Spirit for assurance in canonical questions introduced a subjectivity factor which rendered the question of canon, in the absolute sense, undefinable.[96] While the Reformers did attempt in their creeds to define the limits of canon, Briggs contended that in so doing they betrayed their own principle of canon determination. If scripture was self-evidencing, then that evidence that God was the author was to the individual.[97] In addition, doctrinal definition, in order to be binding upon the Church, had to be held by consensus of the whole church. Both the Reformed churches and the Roman Catholic Church represented but a fraction of the church catholic, hence, they could not give definitive pronouncement to canon questions.[98] He held that the question of canon must then be regarded as open to this day in the subjective (formal) sense. An individual believer was thus free to doubt the canonicity of a particular book without the fear of being charged with heresy.[99]

Summarizing Briggs' method of canon determination: first, the logical order began with the human testimony as probably evidence to the divine origin of Scripture. This testimony brought the individual to esteem the Scriptures highly. Next, when he turned to the pages of Scripture itself, they exerted an influence upon his soul. Finally, the divine testimony convinced him of the extent of the truth of God, at which point he shared in the consensus of the church.[100]

Geisler and Nix proposed five tests for canon which were employed in the early church, *authority*, *prophetic nature*, *authenticity*, *power* and *reception*. These tests have a great affinity with Briggs' threefold

[95]Ibid., 167.

[96]Ibid., 142–44. Even John Warwick Montgomery has noted ("The Theologian's Craft," *CTM* 37 [1966] 82 n. 72, cited in Dunbar, "Biblical Canon, 360), "absolute certainty, both in science and theology, rests only with the data (for the former, natural phenomena; for the latter, scriptural affirmations)." Dunbar admits that "the shape and limits of the canon are not scriptural affirmations. Therefore . . . we cannot claim absolute empirical certainty for our canonical model" (p. 360). This is not to deny that from a practical perspective some theological formulations attain a "certain" status.

[97]Briggs, 142–44. This fact is merely a distillation of the teachings of the Reformers; see Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1:7:1, 4, 5; and the Gallican Confession, article 4.

[98]Ibid., 146.

[99]Ibid., 64. Ridderbos has stated: "There was never any discussion of the canonicity of the majority of the NT writings. The church never regarded these writings as being anything else except the authoritative witness to the great period of redemption" (*The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, 44).

[100]Ibid.

program. However, there is one *crucial* difference. For Geisler and Nix the question is strictly historical, how did the *ancient church* reach its conclusions? For Briggs the question concerns *the modern believer.* How are we *today* assured of the shape of the canon? Briggs' proposal, while injecting an uncomfortable subjective element into the process, does, following the Reformers, recognize the active role the Spirit of God plays in the recognition of His Word. If Goodrick is correct in his analysis of θεόπνευστος, that Scripture is alive "with the vitality of God Himself,"[101] this, too, lends credence to the active and continuing role of the Spirit with reference to Scripture. Briggs' proposal provides a viable apologetic as to how we can bridge the gap between the relativity of historical knowledge and the certainty of faith.

Admittedly if we follow this path we open the door to a subjective factor with which many evangelicals would be uncomfortable. I must admit my own discomfort with what I am proposing. I would much prefer an absolutely logical, rational position which could not be assailed. Yet from a methodological perspective I feel forced to this position. As Kraus has observed, "*as long as the gap between probability and demonstration remains, there also remains the necessity of a subjective and volitional response to the appeal of truth before there can be certainty.*"[102] A strictly inductive and rational approach to the question of canon leaves us only with probability, a very high degree of probability to be sure, but probability as opposed to certainty. We as evangelicals insist upon the necessity of a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ" which by its very nature must be subjective. Is it so difficult for us to admit that God still speaks to us today concerning the Scripture? Or did He cease testifying to its nature in the fourth century?

CONCLUSION

The question of the canon of the New Testament is clearly not as simple as it appears in survey texts and popular presentations. Among evangelicals, theories of canon determination have tended to stress external criteria for assurance that the Scripture we possess today is in fact the whole extent of the revelation which God has given to the believer. While I do not believe this is totally invalid, I have suggested weaknesses in this approach if by it we want to build absolute assurance.

Earlier I used the phrase "the assured results of higher criticism" to describe our apologetic for our New Testament canon. I use the phrase advisedly, not hyperbolically, for it is indeed literary criticism

[101]Edward W. Goodrick, "Let's Put Second Timothy 3:16 Back in the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25:4 (December 1982) 486.

[102]Kraus, *Principle of Authority*, 270 (italics mine).

upon which we engage when we seek to explore the provenance of a document. I use this phrase also to bring to mind the arrogant reconstructionist claims of the nineteenth century concerning the nature of Scripture. As we have watched archaeologists' shovels undercut these "assured results" we have rejoiced that the historic faith of the church in its scriptures has been vindicated again and again. Yet, American evangelicals have forsaken their Reformation heritage and slipped into the same type of rationalism regarding the canon as that for which we castigate liberals of a bygone era. My point here is that we as evangelical Christians are by definition, people of faith. I believe that when we attempt to build our apologetic for our New Testament canon *solely* upon rational ground, we betray the faith principle.

The individual's ultimate assurance that the scripture he has received is indeed the Word of God must be grounded upon something more (but not less) than historical investigation. Scripture as the Word of God brings with it its own witness, the Holy Spirit, who alone can give certainty and assurance.