

12

The Canon of the New Testament

Herman Ridderbos

[p.189]

By the Canon of the New Testament we mean, formally speaking, the collection of 27 books that appear in our Bible beginning with Matthew and ending with Revelation. This formal use of the term corresponds with the Greek word *kanōn*, which can signify "established list," and in this sense of the term is used in connection with the books of the New Testament. However, the Greek word can mean more than just "list," and when we speak of the Canon of the New Testament we also imply a wider meaning. *kanōn* can also mean "measure," "rule," or "norm." In this normative sense the Greek word has gained influence in the Western world, and we continue to use it in this manner, for instance, in our confessions of faith and in our confessional standards: "We receive all these books as holy and canonical in order to regulate our faith according to them, to base it upon them and to fasten it with them" (Belgic Confession, Article 5).

I. METHOD OF TREATMENT

We can conduct our study of the Canon as such from two different viewpoints. We can ask: How and when did the Church come to regard these 27 books of the New Testament as an authoritative collection of peculiar books, separated from all others? That is the question of the history of the Canon. The answer to this question can remain purely descriptive. But we can also ask: *Upon what grounds* has the Church accepted these books as canonical and was it warranted in doing so? That is the basic question of general introduction to the New Testament. The answer to this question in-

[p.190]

volves not only description but also judgment concerning the formation of the Canon. It is from this latter point of view that we undertake this brief study.

II. HISTORICAL POSITIONS CONCERNING THE CANON

The question, to what does the Canon owe its position of authority, can by the Church be answered in only one way: It derives this from God. For whatever comes to us with the highest authority in matters of faith and life can only be dependent upon God himself. Authority comes, not from below, but from above.

This is a general statement. As soon as we attempt to apply this to the Canon of the New Testament, and to analyze it closely, we see at once the great divergence of viewpoints concerning the Canon. In the first place, a basic difference distinguishes Rome and the

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

Reformation. According to the Roman Catholic view, the Canon *viewed in itself* (*quoad se*) possesses undoubted inherent authority. But *as it concerns us* (*quoad nos*), the recognition of the Canon rests upon the authority of the Church. The Church, as the supposed infallible doctrinal authority, guarantees for its members the authority of the Canon of Scripture. It is the Church that has established and fixed its borders. It is the Church also that stands behind the Canon and upon which the authority rests for the faith that this Canon is the Word of God.

The Reformation recognizes no infallible doctrinal authority in the Church, also not in connection with the Canon. The Reformation accordingly did not make the authority of the Canon dependent upon the Church, but primarily upon the evidences of Scripture itself and upon the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the believers (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*). Calvin says in his Institutes, "As to the question, how shall we be persuaded that it came from God without recurring to a decree of the church? it is just the same as if it were asked, How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Scripture bears upon the faith if it is clear evidence of its truth..." (I, 7, 2). For the recognition of Scripture as the Word of God, the Reformation called upon no other authority than Scripture itself.

Still, the Reformers differed in certain respects, especially with reference to the Canon of the New Testament. For Luther the books of the New Testament had authority according to the measure in which they spoke clearly of Christ and of justification through faith alone ("was Christum treibet and prediget"). Luther thus followed more or less the principle of a "Canon in the Canon." On the one hand, in this manner he placed the Christocentric character of the authority of Scriptures in the foreground with great force. On the other hand, in this manner he came to a more critical position with reference to some books of the Canon which, ac-

[p.191]

ording to him, did not contain the essential content of Scripture, or at best contained it partially. However, the churches of the Reformation have held more closely to the views of Calvin than those of Luther in these matters, and the 27 books of the New Testament maintained their position in the Church as holy and canonical until the days of the Enlightenment.

When rationalism gained more and more influence in the Church and faith lost ground, the authority of the Canon was quickly called into doubt and attacked. It is well known that in the years 1771-1775 Johann Salomo Semler published his large work (*Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Kanons*), in which he set aside the a priori of the authority of the Canon. He asserted that the value of the books of the New Testament must be investigated critically, and that the Canon rested upon human decisions which often could not withstand the test of criticism. Only such elements in the Bible, he said, which yield evidence of a true religious knowledge have authority for us. But this authority in no way rests upon the idea of their inclusion in a holy book or in a collection of sacred books. Not

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

the Canon, not the Bible, but the religious consciousness of the enlightened man is the final judge in matters of faith and life.

In Semler's view, the element of authority is transplanted from the Canon to the religious man. The great primary principle of the Reformation, namely, that of the self-evidence of Scripture and of the witness of the Holy Ghost, was now perverted into a thoroughgoing subjectivism. Nevertheless Semler's interpretations became the starting point for later critical positions over against the Canon. Especially his thesis, that the Canon was the result of fallible ecclesiastical decisions and that it was therefore subject to free criticism, made a deep impression upon many. It is true that Semler's rationalism and subjectivism were opposed even by some critical schools, which sponsored a variety of attempts to compromise the authority and the criticism of the Canon.

In recent decades the question of the authority of the Canon has again been brought to the fore in New Testament theology. It is often said now that the authority of the Canon is to be accepted *because* and *in so far as* God speaks to us in the books of the Canon. But in this very criterion "in so far as" lies the difficulty of the problem and the danger of subjectivism. Some wish to return to the essential content of the Gospel as the "Canon in the Canon." They search for an incontestable objective measure within Scripture. Others protest that this is a too static interpretation of the Canon. God speaks—so they say—now here, and then again there, in Scripture. It is the preaching, the *kerygma*, they say, in which Scripture again and again shows itself as Canon. This actualistic concept of the Canon is interpreted by others in a still more subjectivistic manner: Canon is only that which here and now (*hic et nunc*) signifies the Word of God for me. For one like Ernst Käsemann, for instance, the Canon, as it lies before us, is not the Word of God nor identical with the gospel, but it is God's Word only

[p.192]

in so far as it becomes gospel. The question, what then is the gospel, cannot be decided through exposition of Scripture, but only through the believer who "puts his ear to Scripture to listen" and is convinced by the Spirit (cf. Käsemann, *Evangelische Theologie*, 1951-52, p. 21).

It is clear that on this approach the Canon of the New Testament as a closed collection of 27 books becomes a very problematical matter. Can we still hold fast to the creed of the Reformation: We accept all these books as holy and canonical? What basis remains for the Church to believe that God not only wishes to use the books of the Bible as a medium in which he speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, but that he wishes also to bind the Church to the Canon of the New Testament? Can we continue to call upon the self-evidence of Scripture? Or are additional considerations to be gathered out of Scripture itself whereby the place and significance of the Canon of the New Testament come to stand more plainly before us in the plan of God's salvation? In the measure in which we lay emphasis upon the objectivity of the Canon upon Scripture as absolute authority, this question will have our attention.

III. NEW TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES

For a clearer insight into the meaning of the Canon of the New Testament it is of great importance to notice that the foundation for this Canon lies in the history of redemption itself, i.e., in what God has done in the coming and the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. In other words, the significance of the Canon, as a distinctive and authoritative report of what happened "when the time had fully come" and as an objective and fixed norm for faith and life, is given in the New Testament history of redemption itself. While this thought may not be new in itself, recent studies, especially of such concepts as *apostle*, *witness*, and *tradition*, have produced a deeper insight of what is here at stake and a better understanding of what the Canon means for the Church. Although it is not feasible to go into full detail, a closer appreciation of some outstanding results is important.

In the first place, we should observe in this connection the significance of the apostles for the coming Church. We know that the concept "apostle" is defined especially by the idea of authorization, by the transmission of definite powers. In Jewish jurisprudence there existed what was known as the *sjaliach* (apostle), a man who in the name of others could appear with authority and whose significance was thus described: "the *sjaliach* for a person is as this person himself." It is with this meaning that Christ confronted the apostles when he applied the rule, "He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (Matt. 10:40; cf. John 13:20). The apostles are Christ's representatives, those to whom in a very special and exclusive manner he has entrusted the preaching

[p.193]

of the gospel. For this purpose he has not only chosen them through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2), but he has also endowed them with the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of truth—who will teach them all things and recall to mind what Jesus had said, will guide them into fullness of truth and will also explain the future (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15). Therefore, the apostles are given a special significance in the history of salvation. In Hebrews 2:4 ff. they are compared to the angels of the Old Testament as transmitters of the revelation. The salvation that has appeared in Christ Jesus, first proclaimed by the Lord himself, was validly attested to us by the apostles.

This peculiar mandate is always paired in the New Testament with another important datum, namely, that the apostles were witnesses of the salvation revealed in Christ. This concept of witness will also have to be understood primarily in a forensic way, i.e., the apostles were eyewitnesses of the things that have once occurred, and they bear this testimony for the forum of the coming Church and the entire world. Exactly for this reason they are authorized by Christ to bear this testimony in his name. We see, therefore, that in the history of salvation Christ himself has made this provision for the sharing of salvation. This presentation was not left to chance, nor to the general tradition nor to the preaching of the Church. It belongs in the first place, as apostolic preaching and witness,

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

to the reality of revelation itself and as such it carries an entirely unique and exclusive character. This apostolic preaching is the foundation of the Church, to which the Church is bound (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:21; Rev. 21:14); it is the most holy faith, upon which the Church itself must build (Jude 20); it has been delivered to the Church by the apostles as *depositum custodi* (I Tim. 6:20; II Tim. 1:14; 2:2), which the Church must above all things preserve.

And what holds concerning the New Testament concept of witness, holds also for the concept of tradition. In the New Testament, just as certainly as in the early Church, this has a connotation entirely different from the modern Western idea of transmission. The latter has an indefinite character; it is conveyed through a collectivity; its source and trustworthiness are often uncertain. Opposed to this the New Testament concept of "tradition" stands in clear and complete agreement with the Jewish concept, i.e., it bears an overwhelming authoritative significance. "Tradition" means: what has been handed down with authority. And this importance tradition does not owe to its antiquity, nor to the Communion in which it is preserved, but to the persons in whom the source of the tradition lies. These persons in the New Testament are the apostles. The apostolic kerygma and the apostolic witness form the foundation and the authority of the New Testament tradition. This is then also the technical significance of "tradition" (*paradosis*) in the New Testament and of the "preservation" and the "holding fast" of the tradition (I Cor. 1:2; 15:2; II Thess. 2:15; cf. Mark 7:4, 8!). How important a place the concept of "tradition" occupies, for instance, in Paul's epistles, is

[p.194]

apparent from I Corinthians 15:1-3: "Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received [by tradition: *paralambano*], in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast [as authoritative tradition: *katecho*]; for I delivered to you [by tradition: *paradidomi*], what I also received [by tradition: *paralambano*], that Christ died for our sins...." That Paul means by this repeated tradition-concept the authoritative apostolic witness appears from the subsequent verses in I Corinthians 15, in which he sums up the apostolic eyewitness which guarantees the content of the tradition referred to.

We can go a step further: the last authority who guarantees the tradition and who himself also carries forward the tradition is Christ himself. Especially curious in this respect is Cullmann's treatment of the utterance of Paul in I Corinthians 11:23: "For I received by tradition from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread...." Of special importance here are the words: "I received by tradition from the Lord...." Often this has been interpreted that the historical Jesus stood at the beginning of the transmission chain. But in this sense Paul can hardly be said to have "received from the Lord" what was here transmitted. Actually, Paul does not say that he has received from the Lord the establishment of the holy supper; he says, rather, that he has received the message of the institution of the holy supper by tradition from him: "I received by tradition *from the Lord... that the Lord Jesus*," and so forth. Paul means by

this tradition, without doubt, the message that he had received from the original witnesses. Nevertheless he writes that he has for himself (i.e., as apostle) received the deliverances "from the Lord." He means specifically the ascended Lord. The testimony of the eyewitnesses is for him as apostle the delivered word of the glorified Lord. And as such he himself delivers it to the church of Corinth. The ascended Lord stands behind the testimony of his apostles. Not alone as the earthly Jesus, but also as the ascended Lord, he clothes the testimony of the apostles with his authority. Therefore the delivered word of the apostles can also be spoken of as the word of God: "When you received by tradition from us the preached word of God, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God" (I Thess. 2:13).

Even though the apostolic witness and the apostolic tradition in the early period bore primarily an oral character, the inscripturation of the apostolic word came speedily to the fore. New Testament indications of the increasing significance of the scripturally fixed tradition are not lacking. In I Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul fixed and established in ample and deliberate scriptural form what he had first transmitted orally regarding the resurrection. His purpose here is not the introduction of something new, but that the congregation of Corinth should hold fast this tradition "in what terms I preached it to you" (I Cor. 15:1). Therefore he repeats this tradition in

[p.195]

scriptural form. Here the scriptural fixation of what had happened aims to preserve the statement *for now and for ever*. We find the same motive in the prologue of Luke. The evangelist has followed the apostolic tradition accurately from the beginning and has written it down, in order that Theophilus may know the trustworthiness of the things of which he has been informed. Here we can see the beginning of the demarcation-line between the oral and the scriptural tradition, a process which finds its end finally in the formation of the New Testament Canon.

All this suggests the superficiality of the oft-heard contention that neither the authors nor the readers of the New Testament might have seen originally in the books of the New Testament something holy or canonical, and that the real problem of the history of the Canon is, how the books of the New Testament became holy Scripture (Lietzmann). No doubt it may be true that the scriptural form of the apostolic tradition did not receive, provisionally, the same pregnant and outstanding significance as the books of the Old Testament. Nevertheless it should not be forgotten that any apostolic tradition, either oral or scriptural, as such had a special authority that ranked with the prophetic word. The authority of the New Testament books was not something merely attributed to them subsequently by the Church, but was inherent in them from the beginning (J. Gresham Machen). The New Testament letters were destined by the apostles themselves for public reading in the congregation and for that purpose they were exchanged by the churches (cf. I Thess 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3). The concept of a new "Scripture" comes to its expression very clearly in the Gospel of John. The evangelist not only applies the promise of the Holy Spirit (to lead and inspire the apostles in their witness) to his own book (John

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

14-17), but he also explicitly says that "to bear testimony" consists in "to write" (John 21:24), and that what "has been written" in this way ought to induce the readers to the belief in Jesus Christ (John 20:30-31). He uses the technical term, with which he quotes the Old Testament, for his own work when he calls men to believe.

I can only point out these few data. It would be possible, in addition, to bring to mind other scriptural touchstones, for instance in the well-known sayings of II Peter 3:16 and Revelation 22:18, 19. But it seems to me that what has been said in the above justifies sufficiently the conclusion that the great work of salvation of God in Jesus Christ does not confine itself to his actual words and deeds. It consists also in the preservation and in the authoritative communication of what has happened and what has been said in the tradition and the testimonies of specially indicated and qualified bearers and instruments of this revelation. Already in the New Testament itself, the scriptural tradition, represented by these delegated apostles and witnesses, receives the significance of the foundation and standard, i.e., of the "Canon" in behalf of the coming Church.

[p.196]

IV. THE NEW TESTAMENT IDEA OF THE CANON

Here we are distinguishing the redemptive-historical idea of the Canon, in which we may take note of three main elements:

1. That of exclusive authority, according to the authorization of the apostles by Christ himself;
2. That of a qualitatively closed unity, according to the unrepeatable and unique character of the apostolic witness;
3. That of fixation and stabilization, according to its destination as foundation and *depositum custodi* of the Church.

At the same time, it should be stated that this concept of the Canon cannot be harmonized with the idea that the Canon of the Church can be subjected to the so-called "spiritual criticism" of the Church. It must be emphasized that the Church does not control the Canon, but the Canon controls the Church. For the same reason the Canon cannot be the product of the decision of the Church. The Church cannot "make" or "lay down" its own standard. All that the Church can lay down is this, that it has received the Canon as a standard and rule for faith and life, handed down to it with absolute authority. On historical grounds, it can be stated that the Church has been conscious of this in its decisions concerning the Canon. Analysis of the history of the Canon in the Church throws light upon this fact ever more clearly, and it contradicts the interpretation of the Canon as a product or a measure originated by the Church in the battle against Marcion and Montanism. Threats from these sources no doubt induced the Church to clearer reflection and to explicit statements in regard to what had been received in the Canon of the New Testament. But the Church has referred again and again to that which has been

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

handed down by Christ and his apostles, and the only way in which we can adequately judge the rightness or wrongness of the Church in this respect is to judge the validity of this presupposition.

The far more difficult question, whether the Church has been mistaken in receiving this concrete Canon as the Canon of Christ, ought also to be seen essentially in the light of this redemptive-historical a priori. An absolute a posteriori for the acknowledgment of the Canon does not exist. No voice from heaven has been heard upon the decisions of the Church concerning the Canon; no voice in the heart nor in the Church itself can compensate for a divine reaffirmation. Of course, here the antithesis with the Roman Catholic idea of the authority of the Canon is at stake. For the inherent authority of the Canon (*quoad se*) Roman Catholic theology refers to Christ, as do we. But as for the believer's acknowledgment of the Canon and the grounds for it (*quoad nos*), it refers to the authority of the Church. We cannot discuss here this Roman Catholic idea of Church and church-authority in a full way. But as for acknowledgment of the Canon, we must note that the New Testament idea of Canon does not include this element of the

[p.197]

authority of the Church. The New Testament says not only that Christ himself has laid the apostolic foundation for the coming Church, but also that he himself will build the Church on this rock. The Church cannot provide the guarantee of its own foundation, neither for the world nor for its own members. The Church can only point to Christ and to his promise. Therefore the a priori of the faith with regard to the authority of the New Testament Canon cannot be of another nature than *christological*, i.e., it can only be founded in the promise of Christ that he will build the Church upon this foundation.

V. ACCEPTANCE OF THE CANON IN THE EARLY CHURCH

All of this does not release us from the task of investigating the history of the Canon. We cannot and we may not a priori identify the redemptive-historical Canon of Christ with the 27 books of the New Testament. The latter is at once prevented by the fact that the apostolic tradition which Christ has established as a rule for his Church carried an oral as well as a scriptural character. But further, it is precisely the history of the Canon in the Christian Church which poses all kinds of questions and problems in regard to the normativity of the final result. We encounter here variations and divergent lines in ecclesiastical handling. The fallibility of the Church is therefore apparent also in connection with the Canon. For these reasons many still regard this Canon as an uncertain matter, and the "problem of the Canon" is spoken of as a hidden, dragging illness of the Church.

This situation has sometimes been exaggerated. On the other hand, we must not picture things as if consensus in the entire Church regarding the Canon has always been so great that the true "finger of God" could be seen as manifested in the history of the Church in connection with the Canon. Not only do I regard it generally a very difficult thing to

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

identify the "finger of God" in history, but as it concerns the Canon, the facts would warrant no such interpretation. Alongside a very great consensus in connection with the Canon as such, and also in connection with the majority of New Testament books (the "corpus" of the Canon), a very great measure of uncertainty concerning some books has been apparent for a long time. This appears clearly from the statistical data which we find, for instance, in writers such as Origen and Hieronymus. They speak of *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* or *amphiballomena*—books universally acknowledged and accepted, and others concerning which there was no universal consensus. The temporary exclusion from the Canon of Hebrews in the Western Church, and of the Revelation in the Eastern, the uncertainty concerning four catholic epistles in the entire Church, and the continuing exclusion of these in the Syrian Church, give us in bold lines the true state of affairs. The noteworthy fact hereby comes to the fore, that specifically *orthodox* dogmatical considerations temporarily stood in the way of the acceptance of some Scrip-

[p.198]

tures later acknowledged as canonical. The Apocalypse (Revelation), first universally accepted, was for a long time set aside in the Eastern Church because millennialism fastened itself upon the Apocalypse. The same thing *mutatis mutandis* happened to Hebrews in the West. On the grounds of the *evangelium veritatis* of Valentinus (codex Jung), recently discovered by Nag-Hammadi, it was ascertained that around 150 A.D. the Epistle to the Hebrews did not have a lesser authority in Rome than, for instance, the Epistles of Paul. The later putting aside of Hebrews in the West apparently depended not only upon doubt of its apostolic source—although this was put in the foreground—but certainly was also connected with the way the Montanists attached themselves to Hebrews 6. In any case, from the study of the history of the Canon, it appears clear enough that alongside the certainties concerning the chief points, uncertainties on secondary matters played a not unimportant role.

On the other hand, this same history certainly also points out with incontestable force that the Canon has done infinitely more to the Church than the Church to the Canon. It is not possible here to go into full detail concerning the history of the Canon. But the general picture and the universal import of this history seem to be unmistakable. One can say that the history of the Canon *is the process of the growing consciousness of the Church concerning its ecumenical foundation*. The ultimate determination of the Canon at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century can be called the confession of the Church regarding this foundation as far as it was still demonstrable in that time. "As far as still demonstrable": for this foundation had in the beginning by its nature much broader limits and form. The Church is not founded only upon the scriptural, but in the beginning also upon oral apostolic tradition. Also, the entire scriptural tradition did not come into the permanent depository of the Church. For instance, various letters of Paul have been lost. The first Christian congregations and writers lived out of an apostolic tradition not yet quantitatively fixed in size. At this time there is still scarcely an established technical terminology for the designation of the New Testament Scriptures. It is a question whether in the well-known places in 2 Clement 2, 4 and in Barnabas 4, 14, mention is already to be

found, in a technical sense, of "the Scripture" as a description of New Testament writings. In any case, at that time there was greater reference to what "Jesus," what "the Lord," and what "the apostles" had said, or, inclusively, "the gospel." Along the way, indeed, emphasis is found on the *transmitted* character of the gospel, in the New Testament concept of authoritative, apostolic teaching which was received by the Church and was guaranteed especially by those churches which had been founded by the apostles themselves. This tradition is, however, since the time of Irenaeus and Tertullian, identified with the *scriptural* (literary), apostolic tradition. "They deny most decidedly the existence of extra-scriptural tradition. To appeal to revelatory truth apart from Scripture is heretical gnosticism"

[p.199]

(Flesseman-van Leer). This is not to be explained on the basis of a formal, ecclesiastical decision that had been preceded by deliberate reasoning and consideration. Much more the indication lies herein that the Church had never wished to live by anything other than that which had been delivered to it as Canon by way of Christ, and that the Church, in order to be able to continue to do this, as a matter of course returned to and concentrated on a scripturally-fixed tradition. Herein also lies the real significance of the so-called "closing" of the Canon in the fourth and fifth centuries. Therefore, the recognition of a continuing oral tradition alongside the scriptural, as Rome wishes, is totally in conflict with the sense and purpose of the formation of the Canon. By accepting the Canon and setting its limits, the Church has not only distinguished between canonical and noncanonical writings, but it has pointed out the borders wherein for itself the authoritative apostolic tradition lay. This development would have been senseless if at the same time an unlimited oral tradition continued to be canonical.

It is certain that, concerning the vast majority of the 27 books of the New Testament, no shadow of doubt existed concerning their character as tradition (or, in later words, their canonical authority). It is just as certain that differences of opinion concerning the precise boundaries of the body of the Canon remained until the fourth and fifth centuries. Still, these differences must also be seen in the right light. The late Professor de Zwaan of Leiden has expressed himself concerning this as follows: "Actual conflicts over differences in 'canon' are unknown to us and apparently did not occur." He says further: "It is also a fact that those books concerning which there were temporary differences in practice can be counted on the fingers of one hand." If one wishes to get a proper insight into the nature of these different practices, we must compare, on the one hand, the *sine ira et studio* mention of the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena* by authors such as Origen, and on the other hand, the stormy reactions of the Church to Marcion's efforts for a reduction in the Church's accepted apostolic tradition and to the Montanists' attempt to overthrow the absolute borders of this apostolic tradition. This infringement upon what the Church acknowledged as incontestable apostolic depository was something that made it stagger on its foundations. Compared to this, the differences in regard to *homologoumena* and *antilegomena* were scarcely of significance when the issue arose

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

over the two apostolic traditions, even though at times dogmatic and provincial influences disturbed the proper view of the limits of this tradition.

Therefore it is definitely not a simplification of the true state of affairs if we characterize the formation and the later closing of the Canon in the Christian Church as the self-expression of the Church of having been built upon this and no other foundation. Concerning the formation of the Canon, Harnack in his time formulated a number of questions which he characterized as "chief problems of canon history": What was the reason that not merely one, but four Gospels are included in the Canon? Why is there not

[p.200]

one canonical Gospel harmony? Why does the New Testament contain other books in addition to the Gospels? and so forth. In our estimation, these questions have never existed for the Church itself and the answers to these questions never could be a point of consideration. For the Church itself never decided the matter of one or four Gospels, or that of the inclusion of an apostolic Canon alongside the Gospel Canon. These Gospels and Epistles (however different in content and character) did not form the *product* but the basis of the Church's decision. The Church never knew anything different or anything better than that it was these Gospels (and not any Gospel harmony as that of Tatianus) and these Epistles that had been delivered to it by apostolic authority. And if we understand something of Church history, this knowledge came forth out of this source, that the Church indeed never had any other foundation than this tradition concerning (and from) Jesus and the apostles. The Church has dealt in this situation as does one who knows and points to a certain person as father or mother. Such a knowledge rests not on demonstration but upon direct experience; it is most closely connected with one's own identity. In this and no other way must we picture the knowledge and the "decision" of the Church concerning the Canon. They have a direct character and flow forth out of the very existence of the Church itself.

Undoubtedly we find among ecclesiastical writers all kinds of arguments that are supposed to demonstrate the Canonicity of certain books. For instance, we observe that Irenaeus, in the matter of the fourfold Gospel, calls forth the examples of the four winds, the four beasts in the Apocalypse, and so forth (in his battle against the production of new gospels by the Gnostics); so also many apologists later tried to ascribe apostolic sources to all kinds of writings. These arguments all have a certain apparent character of proof-after-the-fact. This appears at once from their artificiality. Without doubt these arguments never served as criteria *canonicitatis*, but they are to be viewed merely as attempts to demonstrate against the arguments of others, what had been considered by the Church as long established.

And what is true of the acceptance of the chief content of the Canon will have to hold also, even if in a little more relative sense, for the latest limitation of the Canon, i.e., of final agreement in reference to certain antilegomena. Here apparently the ecumenical viewpoints carried decisive force. That does not mean that formal ecumenical

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

pronouncements or decisions were made but that the circle of the apostolic tradition bestowed on the Church, seen from an ecumenical viewpoint, appeared to be wider than has been evident in various portions of the Church. The acknowledgment of the 27 books, therefore, has no other significance than the acknowledgment of what appeared to belong to the foundation of the Church in its larger connections.

It is possible that some are under the impression that the evidences for what was given to the Church as Canon are not nearly so absolute in these

[p.201]

later portions as in the body of the Canon universally accepted from the beginning. It is, however, difficult to deny that these final decisions regarding the Canon carry the same self-evident and self-expressing character of the Church concerning its origin and foundation. It was the definitive constituting of that which the Church in the nature of the case had always known and in various ways had always given expression even though not without falling and rising, and not always without hesitation and not always supported by the conscience of the entire Church.

Conclusion

When we review the entire course of the history of the Canon—even though sketched here only in bare outline—it appears, however, that this history supports a posteriori the New Testament christological a priori of the Canon. It is the apostolic tradition received by the Church which it has proclaimed with increasing clarity and certainty as its Canon; it is the Canon in its qualitative finality and, when the oral tradition had passed and become unclear, also the Canon in its quantitative finality of 27 books; it is the Canon as it was entrusted to the Church by Christ and the apostles as its *depositum custodi*, which for the Church continues as the standard and rule for its faith and life.

That this Canon of the New Testament is indeed the Canon of Christ cannot be guaranteed beyond doubt by way of historical demonstration or exegetical skill. But certainly investigation teaches us two things with great clarity. On the one hand, it teaches us to see Christ, who gives to the Church a firm foundation and promises thereupon to build his Church. On the other hand, it teaches us to see the Church, which, in the formation of the Canon, does nothing else than to point out with great positiveness the foundation upon which it is built. That this foundation of the Church is none other than that which Christ has laid, is basically not a subject for scholarly demonstration. It belongs truly to the evidences of the faith, that in the manner in which the Church has accepted the Canon there is seen the fulfillment of the word of the Lord to his apostle: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18).

Herman Ridderbos, "The Canon of The New Testament," Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959. pp.189-201.

[p.405]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Oscar Cullmann, "Scripture and Tradition," in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, June 1953.

Hermann Diem, *Das Problem des Schriftkanons*. Zollikon, Zurich, 1952.

F. W. Grosheide, *Algemene Canoniek van het Nieuwe Testament*. Kampen: Kok, 1925.

W. G. Kümmel, "Notwendigkeit und Grenze des neutestamentlichen Kanons," in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 1950.

Herman Ridderbos, *Heilsgeschiedenis en Heilige Schrift*.

Symposium, *De Apostolische Kerk*, pp. 39-97. Kampen: Kok, 1954.

H. Strathmann, "Die Krise des Kanons der Kirche," in *Theologische Blätter*.

E. Flessemann-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church*. The Netherlands: V. Gorkum Assen, 1953.

B. B. Warfield, "The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, pp. 411-416.

© 1958, 1986 Carl F.H. Henry. Reproduced by kind permission of Dr Carol Henry Bates.

Prepared for the Web in April 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

B. M. Metzger, *The Canon Of The New Testament: Its Origin, Significance & Development*, 1997, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 191-201 and 305-307. A comprehensive discussion is in G. M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment And The Development Of The Canon*, 1992, Clarendon Press: Oxford. It is the one of the most important documents for the early history of the canon of the New Testament. Composed in Latin. Named after its discoverer Ludvico Antonio Muratori and was published by him in 1740.