

The Canonicity of the Bible

By Martin Pickup

R. Laird Harris once wrote, “It is rather strange that more attention has not been given in theological circles to questions of canonicity” (131). It is strange indeed, since the subject deals with what books belong in our Bible. This is certainly not an insignificant issue. Canonicity lies at the foundation of all that we do as Christians. Some may think that even raising the question of what books should be in the Bible is an impious attack upon the faith. Frankly, it would be easier to sit back and blindly accept the 66 books of our Bible as is. But honesty, as well as the Bible itself, compels us to be “ready to make a defense” for every aspect of our faith (1 Pet. 3:15). Moreover, loose ideas about the canon and its formation are among our own brethren — as illustrated in the recent “Nashville Meeting.” This should awaken us to the fact that this is a very real and pressing issue.

Our English word “canon” is derived from the Greek word *kanon*. Originally it referred to a reed, and later to any straight, unbending tool such as a ruler or level. Eventually it was used to indicate a standard or rule which one should follow. Paul used the term in this sense in Galatians 6:16: “Those who will walk by this *rule*, peace and mercy be upon them.” *Kanon* was first used in reference to the Scriptures themselves in the mid-fourth century, when Athanasius used this word to indicate the list of writings regarded as divinely authoritative (Souter 141-46; Metzger 289-93). In this discussion we are using the word “canon” to indicate those writings which were inspired by God and therefore comprise our standard of authority.

The concept of a canon of Scripture goes back to ancient Judaism. The Jews understood that God had spoken to their forefathers through Moses and then through the prophets who followed him. As God's spokesmen, their messages were divinely authoritative. Moses and the prophets gave their messages orally to the people of their own day, but they also put them in written form. The written message could easily be passed down to subsequent generations, giving the divine teaching an enduring authority. The collected writings of Moses and the prophets were naturally regarded by the Jews as an authoritative standard, i.e. a canon. In the same way, the message of Jesus, which was communicated to the world through His apostles and prophets, possessed an inherent authority. Though first delivered orally, the apostolic teaching was eventually put in written form. This enabled Christians of later generations to have a formal standard for their Christian life.

The two major questions we must consider are: (1) Which writings should we regard as comprising our canon? (2) How do we know? We might wish that God, at some point in history, had miraculously given a declaration from heaven to tell the whole world what books He had inspired. But He did not do so. God apparently feels that we are capable of ascertaining canonical writings through natural means. This is not to say that men always employ the proper means. Before proceeding, we need to become acquainted with two erroneous, yet common approaches to determining what writings are canonical.

Erroneous Approaches to Canonicity

The Witness of the Holy Spirit

Denominationalists frequently affirm that the Holy Spirit testifies to men's hearts that the 66 books of the Bible are the word of God. This view is particularly common among Evangelicals. Edward J. Young wrote,

One of the blessings of regeneration is that the Spirit of God opens the eyes of man's understanding to clearly perceive these strong marks of the divine origin of Scripture to which marks he formerly had been blind. This inward testimony of the Holy Spirit enables a man to recognize the Scripture as truly from God. (157)

Rene Pache says,

The Lord works according to three miracles. He grants *inspiration* to the sacred writers; *illumination* to the open-hearted individual reader, that he may understand the inspired text; and *discernment* to the body of believers, for the recognition of the books of divine origin and for the inclusion of these books in the canon." (160)

If this sounds Calvinistic, it is. John Calvin expounded the doctrine in the *Institutes of Christian Religion* (I:86-91). This view was fundamental to the Protestant Reformers as they opposed the Roman Catholic view that the Church authenticated the Scriptures.

The fundamental error of this approach to canonicity is the error of Calvinistic theology itself. The Scriptures nowhere claim that the Spirit supernaturally illumines the heart of an individual or authenticates the Bible. Moreover, this approach to canonicity entangles one in

religious subjectivism. What if someone claims the Spirit has testified to him that *other* writings are the word of God? What do you say to the person who claims that, as he read the book Mormon, the Holy Spirit “told him” it was God's word? A subjective approach to canonicity will never work.

The Early Church Established The Canon

This is the most common approach today in regard to the New Testament canon. According to this view, from the first to the fourth centuries the Church was determining what writings had been inspired and it finally collected them into an authoritative canon. This process of “canonization” was very gradual. Apostolic writings addressed to one church came to be circulated among the churches in that vicinity and, in time, were accepted as canonical in that area. More widespread acceptance was slow in coming. By the third century all 27 New Testament books had received general recognition, but in some areas a few were doubted and a few additional books may have been accepted. In the fourth century, as the Church had become more institutionalized, there was general agreement regarding the canon. Doubts over some books had been dispelled, and wrongful additions had been weeded out. Church councils such as the ones at Hippo and Carthage, and key Church leaders such as Athanasius, gave a formal acknowledgement to the books which had been universally accepted. This conception of canonicity is what allows William Barclay to say, “It took more than three hundred years for the New Testament to reach its final form” (43).

This approach maintains that the post-apostolic Church handed down the New Testament canon which we use today. “It is then to the Church, as `a witness and keeper of

'holy writ,' that we must look both for the formation and the proof of the Canon. The written Rule of Christendom must rest finally on the general confession of the Church" (Westcott 12-13). One should not think that this view denies the inspiration of the New Testament books; it simply maintains that inspiration alone did not make a book canonical to the whole Church. An inspired writing only became canonical after it was "received by the Church," which usually is understood to mean the majority of churches in the ancient world. "Attainment of canonical status consists in the recognition...and affirmation (by the Church acting officially) that only certain documents in use by the Church...are absolutely unique and normative for the Church" (Meyer 602-3). The post-apostolic Church had to determine for later generations what books were inspired, and thus, formally establish the canon.

Nearly all works on canonicity available to this writer manifest this concept. This includes such well-known treatises as those by Westcott, Gregory, Souter, Kummel, and Metzger. On this issue, Catholics and Protestants hold essentially the same position. It is true that Catholicism maintains that the Catholic Church, by means of its inherent authority, validates the canon, while Protestants have always denied that the authority of the canon is dependent upon the Church's authority. Nevertheless, Protestant acceptance of what is canonical has always been based upon the traditional determination of the early Church. F. F. Bruce frankly admits this fact in his article "Tradition and the Canon of Scripture" (59-84). Even those who are vehemently opposed to Church tradition authorizing anything tend to equivocate when it comes to canonicity. Norman Geisler, for example, strongly affirms that God determined what is canonical, not the Church; but for all practical purposes he returns to this

idea when he says that the Church, as an official body, had to recognize the canon: “The early Fathers sorted out the profusion of religious literature, discovered, and gave *official recognition* [emphasis mine, MP]” to the books God inspired (147).

What is wrong with saying that the post-apostolic Church established the books that are canonical? First and foremost, it is predicated upon an institutionalized conception of the Church. The Church is viewed as a religious movement which developed into an organization of churches. This organization is seen as possessing some kind of right to determine for its members religious doctrine or, in this case, the canon from which that doctrine is to be derived. But the original Church — the Church spoken of in those Scriptures themselves — was not of such a nature. The Church of the New Testament was simply those individuals who submitted to the authority of Christ, not some organization of churches possessing authorizing privilege. The New Testament Church had no power to authorize anything, much less validate what its own standard should be. This was the prerogative of God alone (Matt. 23:8-10). There were no officiating Church councils, nor did Church tradition, no matter how widespread the practice, ever establish anything. The apostle Paul made it quite clear that no matter what the Christian community might come to believe, this did not make it true (Gal. 1:6-9; 2:3-14). After the apostolic age there were many alterations made in the original apostolic teaching, not the least of which was in regard to the nature of the Lord's Church. The conception of the Church evolved into that of a religious institution, possessing to some degree an inherent authority. However, it is self-contradictory to accept the New Testament canon because it was handed

down by an institutional Church of the fourth century, when those very Scriptures teach a non-institutional Church.

This is not to say that we should refrain from studying the views of post-apostolic Christians. They often provide us with valuable historical information regarding the apostolic writings, such as authorship, provenance, etc. But we must not accept a book as canonical simply because earlier espousers of Christ did so. Apostolic Christianity teaches individual responsibility to Christ in everything, and not loyalty to some group standing between the individual and Christ.

In spite of this, the belief that the early Church established the canon is held even among our own brethren. Bill Swetmon, in the Nashville Meeting, said that the New Testament books were written by inspiration in the first century, but that the canon was not completed until centuries later. "God allow(ed) 400 years to pass before, through His providence, the Scriptures were canonized." By way of example, Swetmon said that the Church was in existence for "400 years before (2 John) was finally accepted as having apostolic authority" by the Church. We ask, What would lead this man to make such statements? The answer is that he holds an institutionalized conception of the nature of the Church. Viewing the Church as an organization of churches, he has readily accepted the view of "canonization" which pervades the denominational, institutional world.

Christ: The Key to the Canon

If we claim to be Christians then we should go to Christ to learn what is our proper standard of authority. We need to ascertain what Jesus had to say about this issue. Virtually all

we know about Jesus' teaching comes from four accounts of His life: the records (or “gospels”) of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. At this point, someone may charge us with employing circular reasoning, but this is an invalid criticism. One does not have to presuppose the inspiration of these writings to utilize them as historical sources. In fact, the authors of these documents present their material to the reader, first and foremost, as historical data. Ultimately, of course, they have an evangelistic aim, but this does not negate the fact that these documents claim to present a factual record of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth based upon eye-witness testimony (cf. Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31; 21:24).

According to these records, in the first century Jesus of Nazareth preached throughout Palestine the coming kingdom of God and then affirmed himself to be the king over that kingdom. He confirmed these bold claims by performing numerous miracles, culminating with His own resurrection from the dead. I believe that the testimony found in the four gospels is convincing. For this reason, I believe Jesus was what He claimed to be: Christ, the Son of God, sent from heaven to save a sinful world. If one accepts this, then what Jesus had to say about the canon should be decisive.

The Old Testament Scriptures

Jesus himself confirmed the inspiration and canonicity of the Jewish Scriptures — what we would call the Old Testament. Jesus constantly quoted these Scriptures to present a teaching or to decisively prove an argument (e.g., Matt. 4:4-10; 22:29-32, 43-45). This indicates that He understood these Scriptures to be authoritative. Statements such as the following manifest Jesus' high regard for the divine origin of these writings: “The Scripture cannot be

broken” (John 10:35); “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!...All things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:25, 44). Though Jesus repudiated the oral tradition which had become so central to Pharisaic Judaism, labeling it manmade (Mark 7:7-9), He fully accepted the Jewish canon as the infallible word of God.

But what books comprised the Jewish canon of Jesus' day? The books of today's Hebrew Bible have been preserved for centuries in what is called the Masoretic Text. They are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (Minor Prophets), Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles. This totals 24 books, though in content they are the same as the familiar 39 books found in our Bibles. The difference is only in how they are enumerated. Jews reckon the two books of Samuel, the two books of Kings, the two books of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, and the twelve Minor Prophets as one book each.

This same collection of Scriptures can be traced back for centuries. A tract in the Babylonian Talmud from the fourth century BC lists these 24 books by name. Early Christian writers, such as Eusebius (AD 325), Origen (AD 250), and Tertullian (AD 200), speak of the Jewish canon consisting of 24 or 22 books. Again, the difference was only one of enumeration: sometimes Lamentations was appended to Jeremiah and Ruth was appended to Judges.

Other evidence indicates these were the same Jewish Scriptures recognized in the time of Christ and long before. The prologue to the Apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus, written in 132

BC, speaks of Jesus Ben-Sirach's devotion to "the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our fathers." Even more significant is the statement of the Jewish historian Josephus, written about AD 90:

Nothing can be better attested than the writings authorized among us. In fact, they could not be subject to any discord, for only that which the prophets wrote ages ago is approved among us, as they were taught by the very inspiration of God....For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from and contradicting one another, but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all past times; which are justly believed to be divine....During so many ages as have already past, no one has been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them. (*Against Apion* I. 8. 861-62.)

Josephus goes on to say that the Jewish canon consisted of the Law, the Prophets and "the remaining books" — all of which he says totalled 22 books. It is clear that these 22 books are identical to the Jewish canon we know of through the centuries. Since Josephus says this collection of Scriptures had been recognized by Jews for centuries, these must have been the Scriptures Jesus had used. Further corroboration for this comes from the quotations of the Old Testament made by Jesus and the New Testament writers. The various Scriptures they cite correspond to the Jewish canon known through the centuries. Every book of the Jewish canon is expressly quoted in the New Testament except Judges-Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. There should be no doubt that the Jewish canon we

know today was the same canon in use in Jesus' day — the same canon which Jesus affirmed to be the inspired, authoritative word of God.

It is sometimes alleged that the Jewish canon was in a state of flux at the time of Christ, and that it was not fixed until AD 90 when a Jewish council convened at the city of Jamnia. Jewish records do indicate that some rabbis raised questions about the canonicity of Ezekiel, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Proverbs and Esther. However, there is no real evidence that the Jamnia meeting was anything more than an informal discussion, and it is certainly unwarranted to say that these rabbis “finalized” the Old Testament canon. There is no evidence that there were any discussions about adding any new books to the Jewish canon. The books about which questions were raised were books which had long been accepted as canonical. The most that could be said is that the Jamnia rabbis evaluated and reaffirmed the validity of the makeup of a canon which had long been accepted.

The "Apocrypha"

This term literally means “hidden books.” It once referred to writings which were deemed esoteric, and not to be read by the masses. It is commonly used to refer to select writings which some Christians throughout history have regarded as part of the Old Testament canon. These works are 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Additions to Daniel, The Prayer of Manasseh, 1 and 2 Maccabees. All of these were composed between 200 BC and 100 AD, long after the time when the Old Testament books were written. Some Christians in the early centuries did believe certain of the Apocrypha were inspired. Apocryphal books are found in the earliest extant

manuscripts of the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament made in Alexandria. In 1546 the Roman Catholic Church officially pronounced most of the Apocryphal books inspired and part of the Old Testament canon. The Eastern Church has long recognized the Apocrypha. Protestants have historically disavowed the inspiration and canonicity of the Apocrypha, though up until about 1825 Protestant Bibles still commonly included the Apocrypha in a special section.

Should these books be viewed as part of the Old Testament canon? No, because Jesus did not recognize them. The Jewish canon which Jesus used never included the Apocrypha. It is true that they are found in the earliest extant manuscripts of the Septuagint, but these manuscripts come from the fourth century AD and were transmitted by Christians. This does not prove that Jews in Alexandria, 500 years before, had included them in their Septuagint, much less that they regarded them as canonical. Even if we granted a possibly broader canon in Alexandria, the Apocrypha were certainly not part of the Palestinian Scriptures which Jesus would have used. Josephus says the Jewish canon consisted of the regular 22 books, and he says no Jew had ever been so bold as to add anything to them. Even more significant is this statement: "It is true, our history hath been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former of our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time" (*Against Apion* I. 8. 861-62). It is significant that Jesus and the New Testament writers never quote from any Apocryphal book.

The New Testament Scriptures

Ascertaining the books comprising the New Testament canon is a more involved procedure than ascertaining the books of the Old Testament canon. But once again, we need to start with Christ. The early accounts of Jesus' life indicate that Jesus foretold the future divine guidance of certain men who would proclaim His teaching to the world. Jesus commissioned His apostles with statements like this: "But when He, the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth...He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you" (John 16:13-14; see also John 20:21-23; Matt. 10:20; 16:19; 18:18; Luke 22:30). Jesus never intended to personally proclaim His teaching to the world. This task was given to appointed messengers who would be inspired to proclaim the divine message.

This being the case, whatever these appointed messengers would teach would be authoritative. This would of course apply to their oral message, but we would expect these men to produce written records as the Old Testament prophets had done, so that their message could be of value to later generations. Therefore, the question which Christians have always needed to ask is this: what apostolic, inspired writings are available to us? Whatever apostolic teaching is available, this would be what Christ said we should follow as our standard, i.e. the New Testament canon. The equity of God makes it certain that He would see to the composition and preservation of a sufficient number of inspired writings so that men throughout time could know His complete will.

Apostolic Epistles

There are several apostolic epistles which are available. That an inspired message should be presented in the form of a letter is not without precedent. God had Jeremiah use this method to give prophetic instruction to the exiles in Babylonia (Jer. 29). In the same way, the apostles of Christ wrote letters so that they could have contact with Christians throughout the ancient world.

Two epistles exist which were written by the apostle Peter. The first begins, "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ"; the second, "Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ." Modern scholars often reject the Petrine authorship of 2 Peter, claiming it was a pseudonymous letter written in the first half of the second century. The chief reasons are stylistic differences with 1 Peter and the fact that, because of these differences, some Christians in the early centuries doubted its authenticity. But arguments based on literary style are always tenuous, and it is impossible to come up with a just motive for this supposed second-century author. The author of 2 Peter calls himself "Simon Peter...an apostle," mentions his previous letter, makes numerous personal references, speaks of his imminent death, and offers eyewitness testimony of the Transfiguration as a means of strengthening the faith of his readers. The pseudonym-theory for 2 Peter has to be considered, but in the final analysis it exceeds the limits of plausibility.

Four epistles exist from the apostle John: 1, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation. In the first three the author's name is not included in the text, but he clearly presents himself as an eyewitness of Jesus and as someone with the kind of authority only an apostle of Christ would

possess (1 John 1:1-5; 4:6; 3 John 10). In the second century these letters were commonly understood to have come from the pen of the apostle John, as indicated by the Muratorian Fragment, Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* III. xvi. 5), and other writers. Revelation claims to be the revelation given by Christ “to His bond-servant John” (1:1). It calls itself a “prophecy” (1:3). Again, second-century writers indicate the author was known to have been John the apostle. Irenaeus speaks of how the precise text of Revelation 13:18 had been verified by people who had seen John in person (*Against Heresies* V. xxx. 1). Justin says that Revelation was written by “John, one of the apostles of Christ” (*Dialogue* LXXXI). The gnostic work, *Apocryphon of John* (c. A.D. 150 or earlier) also indicates that John the apostle was the understood author of Revelation. It has been suggested that the author of at least some of the Johannine material may have been another “John,” based upon a statement by Papias who speaks of “John the elder” in possible distinction from John the apostle (*Ecclesiastical History* iii. 39). But this theory rests upon an interpretation of the Papias passage which is by no means certain. Papias may very well have regarded John the elder and John the apostle as one and the same man.

At least 13 epistles were written by Paul: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. Though Paul was not one of the original twelve apostles, his apostleship is well-substantiated. Paul's traveling companion Luke, in the book of Acts, records Paul's testimony regarding his special call to apostleship (22:1-21; 26:2-20). Paul's firsthand account is contained in his letter to the Galatian churches (1:11-17). Paul's letters are replete with affirmations of apostolic authority, and in Galatians 2:7-10 Paul says that the apostles Peter and John had acknowledged

his apostolic status. This is confirmed by Peter himself in 2 Peter 3:15: "Regard the patience of our Lord to be salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters...." Peter even puts Paul's epistles on a par with the Old Testament, classifying them as part of "the Scriptures" (v. 16).

Another epistle to be considered is one written by James. Its greeting reads, "James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). The content of this letter shows that the author writes from an authoritative posture, expecting his readers to heed his teaching because of who he is. Who, then, is this James? Two of the original twelve apostles were named James: James the son of Zebedee, and James the son of Alphaeus (Mark 3:17-18). It seems more likely, however, that the author of this epistle was another man: James the brother of Jesus who, after being converted, held a prominent position among the Judean Christians (Matt. 12:46; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor. 15:7). In Galatians 1:19, when Paul speaks of his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, he says, "I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas [Peter]... but I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother." Paul's wording implies that this James, though not one of the original apostles, was rightly classified as an apostle of Christ. He no doubt received a special call to apostleship even as Paul did. In the final analysis, whichever James it was who wrote this epistle, he was one who held an apostolic position and his teaching should be regarded as authoritative.

The Gospels

On the night of Jesus' betrayal, it is reported that He said to His apostles, "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (John 14:26). Part of the commission of the original apostles involved their testifying to the world of the things which Jesus had taught during His earthly ministry, and Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would assist them in recalling all of these things. As the apostles of Christ began to spread the gospel throughout Palestine and the ancient world, they first related this information orally. Compilations of this material were being made from an early date (Luke 1:1). Two of the original apostles themselves composed written accounts, viz. Matthew and John.

Aside from these two gospels, two other accounts exist of the life and teachings of Christ: those written by Luke and Mark. Though not apostles themselves, these men each compiled a written account of the facts about Jesus which the apostles were delivering. Luke says that he records these things "just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word have handed them down to us." He says he "investigated everything carefully from the beginning" so that the reader "might know the exact truth" (Luke 1:2-4). A comparison of Mark's gospel with Matthew and Luke shows that Mark was also recording apostolic testimony regarding Jesus. Most of Mark's material is the same as that found in Matthew and Luke. It was commonly understood in the second century that Mark had received his information directly from the apostle Peter.

One might object that the accounts of Luke and Mark, since they were not actually written by apostles, should not be regarded as absolutely authoritative. But the apostles speak of prophets who were associated with them and who also were guided by inspiration (Eph. 2:20; 3:5). In 1 Timothy 5:18, when Paul cites the words of Jesus (along with Deut. 25:4), he quotes verbatim from Luke 10:7 and introduces this with the words, "For the Scripture says." This is extremely significant, because the apostle Paul puts his stamp of approval on the work of a non-apostle, referring to it as inspired Scripture.

Acts

Luke's account of the life of Christ is really just the first half of a two-part history. The book of Acts continues the story by detailing the beginning of the Church and the initial spread of the gospel (1:1). Since Paul considered Luke's first work to be Scripture, it is evident that the same would be true of Luke's second work on the history of the early Church.

Other Epistles

The author of the book of Jude begins his letter, "Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James" (1:1). Obviously, he and his brother were well enough known to his readers so that further identification was unnecessary. Jude does not claim to have been an apostle; in fact, vv. 17-18 would seem to imply that he did not consider himself part of that group. But he seems to manifest an authoritative posture, since it is taken as quite natural for his audience to receive a letter from him containing instruction needing to be heeded (v. 3). Matthew 13:55 says that Jesus' natural brothers included a James and a Jude (Gk. Judas). It seems most likely that this is the Jude who composed this epistle. Though Jude was not an

apostle, he could have been a prophet. Admittedly, uncertainty about the author's identity and prophetic status makes it somewhat uncertain how we should regard his epistle. But if, for this reason, one hesitated to regard Jude as canonical, this would present no practical problem for Christianity. No Christian doctrine hinges on the teaching of Jude. The material in this short letter is not so much doctrinal as it is edificational. Moreover, it is almost identical in content to 2 Peter chapter two.

No book has evoked more discussion concerning authorship than the epistle to the Hebrews. It would be impossible to discuss the question adequately in this short space, but the following comments are offered in so far as our discussion of canonicity is concerned. Though the Hebrew writer was obviously well known to his original audience (13:18), he did not include his name in the epistle's address. Some writers in the early centuries claimed that Paul was the author; others said the author was unknown. Our uncertainty regarding this epistle's authorship produces uncertainty regarding its inspiration and canonicity. However, several facts need to be kept in mind. It is significant that as early as A.D. 110 the book of Hebrews evidences about as widespread a circulation throughout the Christian churches as does any inspired writing. But even if we must still admit some doubt about the Hebrew writer's inspiration, his teaching would be true nonetheless. The methodology of Hebrews is such that the doctrinal arguments the writer makes are really just necessary inferences drawn from Old Testament passages. Moreover, a careful study will show that few, if any, of the doctrines in Hebrews (even those concerning Christ's priesthood) are not taught at least briefly in other New Testament books.

The "New Testament Apocrypha"

Aside from the 27 writings discussed above, there exist a few late first-/early second-century writings which warrant at least a brief consideration, if only because some Christians in the early centuries may have regarded them as inspired. Many of these works were written by men commonly referred to as "the Apostolic Fathers." The entire group is usually designated the New Testament Apocrypha. It includes 1 Clement, Pseudo-Barnabas, the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, the epistle of Polycarp, the epistles of Ignatius, the Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Peter, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and several others. As valuable as some of these writings are for historical studies, we may confidently say that none deserves a place in the New Testament canon. The material in many of them is quite fanciful and erroneous when compared with the New Testament books, and it is no wonder that most early Christians regarded those particular works as heretical. The ones which are more sober in quality usually make no claim of inspiration. 1 Clement, possibly the earliest of these writings (c. A.D. 95), is not even written in the name of Clement, but in the name of the church at Rome. Moreover, several of these authors draw clear lines of distinction between their own material and the inspired writings of the previous generation (e.g., 1 Clement 42-44,47; Polycarp 3,6).

Early Use and Circulation of the New Testament Books

Since most New Testament epistles were occasional letters (i.e. originally written to select churches for particular purposes), it is commonly asserted that it was never the original intention that these writings should be collected into a New Testament canon for the Church universal. "The writers of these apostolic epistles, though confident that they speak with

authority, reveal no consciousness that their words would come to be regarded as a permanent standard of doctrine and life in the Christian Church” (Metzger 4). This is simply not true.

We fail to understand the apostolic function adequately if we think that the apostles would not have regarded their writings as having an immediate, universal, and enduring authority. The apostles indicate that their teaching, whether in written or oral form, was to be viewed as the permanent standard for all Christians (2 Thess. 2:15; Gal. 1:8-9; 1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Pet. 3:2; Rev. 1:3). They regarded their writings as on a par with the Old Testament (2 Pet. 3:15-16; 1 Tim. 5:18). It is foolish to think that the apostles never considered the long range effect of their written message, which could easily be copied and circulated — never thought about how this written message would enable subsequent generations to have a permanent record of the things they were teaching to the world (cf. 2 Pet. 1:15; John 20:31).

Another question is how long it took for the New Testament books to be widely circulated so that Christians throughout the ancient world could have had access to them. It has been alleged that it took several generations, perhaps as much as three or four hundred years, for the New Testament writings to become widely available. If true, this would mean that churches in the initial post-apostolic period were left without a real canon. They would have had to rely for many generations solely upon oral tradition regarding the teaching of the apostles, until the New Testament writings could become widely available. They would have had no access to an inspired standard upon which to base their beliefs and practices.

Despite what some may claim, there is both internal and external evidence to show that the New Testament documents did receive extensive circulation early on, so that the

post-apostolic generation did not have to rely solely upon oral transmission of the apostolic teachings. First of all, several of the epistles were expressly addressed to more than one church: Revelation was addressed to the seven churches of Asia; Galatians to the churches of that region; 1 and 2 Peter to saints throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Bithynia and Asia; James to Christians generally. Secondly, statements made in some epistles indicate they were to be circulated to others besides the original addressees. Colossians 4:16 says, "When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter which is coming from Laodicea." Though 1 and 2 Corinthians were written to the church at Corinth to deal with particular issues plaguing that church, Paul's address implies that these letters were to be circulated beyond that one church: "...to the church...which is at Corinth *with all the saints who are throughout Achaia*"; "...to the church of God which is at Corinth...*with all who in every place call upon the name of the Lord*" (2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; see also 1 Thess. 5:27). All of this shows that the New Testament authors expected their writings to be copied and to have immediate, widespread distribution.

An analysis of the historical evidence reveals that this is exactly what occurred. In 2 Peter 3:15-16 Peter indicates that the saints throughout Asia Minor already had knowledge of "Paul's epistles." Peter's letter was written shortly before his death (c. AD 64). Though Peter may not have had in mind Paul's last three letters (2 Timothy had not yet been written, and 1 Timothy and Titus only recently), all of Paul's other epistles had been written between 5 to 15 years before this. It is quite evident from what Peter says that Paul's writings were being rapidly circulated.

In addition to the New Testament documents themselves, we have data from 1 Clement (c. AD 95), the letters of Ignatius (c. AD 110), and the letter of Polycarp (c. AD 110). These writings are valuable to this study because they are quite early, we know where their authors lived and the places to which they were writing, and they contain many New Testament quotations and allusions. By analyzing this material it is possible to construct a picture of how extensively copies of the New Testament books had been circulated by about AD 110 (the date of the letters of Polycarp and Ignatius). According to most reckonings, AD 110 would be only a little more than a decade after the death of John, the last of the apostles.

1 Clement is a letter written by Clement of Rome to the church at Corinth. It shows the use of one or more of the synoptic gospels, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Hebrews, and possibly the gospel of John, Acts, James, and 1 Peter. Ignatius was a bishop of the church at Antioch (Syria). About AD 110 he was taken under guard to Rome where he was to be executed. He wrote seven letters en route, one to Christians in Rome and six to Christians in various cities of Asia Minor. Ignatius makes use of Matthew, John, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, and possibly Luke, Hebrews and 1 Peter. Polycarp was a bishop of the church at Smyrna (Asia Minor) who wrote a letter to the church at Philippi (Macedonia). His letter shows the use of Matthew, Luke, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Hebrews, 1 John, 1 Peter, and possibly John, Acts, 2 Corinthians, Colossians and 2 John.

When these writers make use of New Testament books it indicates that at least those books were utilized in the author's own church. Though we cannot say that all the books an author uses must have been available to the recipients of his letter, in some instances Clement,

Ignatius and Polycarp refer to New Testament books in such a way that it presumes a knowledge of these books on the part of the recipients. We also know that by AD 110 many important writings from non-inspired men were being copied and sent from Asia to Macedonia (Polycarp 13). Surely the same would already have been done with available inspired writings. This suggests that whatever inspired writings are evidenced in Asia by this time would also have been available in Macedonia.

We now offer the following chart which shows what the evidence indicates about the early use of New Testament books in the following regions: Rome, Macedonia, Achaia, Asia, the rest of Asia Minor (i.e. Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Bithynia [1 Pet. 1:1]), and Syria. A glance at any Bible map will show how great an area this encompasses. At least by AD 110 (and in many instances much earlier) we have evidence for the use of New Testament books in these locations.

*As Early as AD 110 — Where Are the NT Books Evidenced?**

Matthew: (Rome), (Macedonia), (Achaia), Asia, (Syria)
Mark: Rome, (Macedonia), Achaia, (Asia)
Luke: (Rome), (Macedonia), (Achaia), Asia, (Syria)
John: (Macedonia), Asia, Syria
Acts: (Macedonia), (Asia)
Romans: Rome, (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor, Syria
1 Corinthians: Rome, Macedonia, Achaia, Asia, Asia Minor, Syria
2 Corinthians: (Macedonia), Achaia, (Asia), Asia Minor, (Syria)
Galatians: Rome, (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor, Syria
Ephesians: Rome, Macedonia, (Achaia), Asia, Asia Minor, Syria
Philippians: Rome, Macedonia, Asia, Asia Minor, Syria
Colossians: (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor, Syria
1 Thessalonians: Macedonia, Asia, Asia Minor, Syria
2 Thessalonians: Macedonia, Asia, Asia Minor, (Syria)
1 Timothy: (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor
2 Timothy: (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor
Titus: Rome, (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor

Philemon: (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor, (Syria)
Hebrews: Rome, (Macedonia), (Achaia), Asia, (Syria)
James: (Rome)
1 Peter: (Rome), (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor, (Syria)
2 Peter: (Macedonia), Asia, Asia Minor
1 John: (Macedonia), Asia
2 John: (Macedonia), Asia
3 John: (Macedonia), Asia
Jude:
Revelation: Rome, (Macedonia), Achaia, Asia

*Parentheses indicate the evidence points to possible use in this region.

(Note: Information from two other sources might be included in this chart. The Shepherd of Hermas, written from Rome, may have been written c. AD 90-100 or earlier. The writings of Papias, from Asia, may be c. 110. If we include the data from these works, then by AD 110 John's gospel and James were definitely known in Rome and Mark was definitely known in Asia.)

This chart illustrates how rapid and extensive the circulation of New Testament books must have been. Keep in mind that the chart is only showing what the *available* evidence indicates. Though a book may not be evidenced in a certain region, this does not necessarily mean it was unknown there. For instance, we would not expect Clement, Ignatius and Polycarp to quote or allude to every New Testament book in their possession. The fact that the available evidence (as little of it as there is) still manifests this much circulation suggests that the actual circulation was even greater. It is particularly interesting to note how extensively 1 Corinthians was circulated. Though perhaps the most "occasional" of the New Testament books, the evidence for its widespread circulation is actually greater than any other book. This analysis clearly refutes the idea that it took many generations before the New Testament books came to be widely used among the early churches.

We conclude our study where we began, by emphasizing that the question of canonicity lies at the very foundation of Christian service. We can be assured of this: God has inspired the writings which His people are to regard as their standard, His providence has seen to their preservation, and He has enabled us to ascertain which writings these are. Jesus is the key to canonicity. The sacred writings of the Jews which he validated, and the writings of the apostles and prophets which He pre-approved, need to be accepted as our divine standard. It is this writer's hope that this discussion will cause all of us to have an increased appreciation for the canon. Most importantly, may we all live our lives in accordance with it.

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