

For the Apostles' Glorious Company*William Walsham How (1823–1897)*

For the Apostles' glorious company,
 Who, bearing fort the Cross o'er land and sea,
 Shook all the mighty world, we sing to Thee,
 Alleluia.

For the Evangelists, by whose blest word,
 Like fourfold streams, the garden of the Lord
 Is fair and fruitful, be Thy name adored.
 Alleluia.

For Martyrs, who, with rapture-kindled eye,
 Saw the bright crown descending from the sky,
 And died to grasp it, Thee we glorify.
 Alleluia.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

*In the Nick of Time***Canonicity and the New Testament***Kevin T. Bauder*

Recognizing the canonicity of the Old Testament writings is relatively easy. We can accept the evaluations made by Israel about which writings are authoritative. These evaluations have been endorsed by Jesus and the apostles. Israel has handed the Church an intact canon for the Old Testament.

Similarly, we can follow the example of Jesus and the apostles in their usage of the apocryphal books. They were surely aware of these documents, which (among other things) narrate important aspects of Israel's history. Nevertheless, the Jews of Jesus' day did not accept these writings as Scripture. Jesus never cited or used them at all. Aside from a possible allusion or two, the apostles never referenced them and certainly did not endorse them as authoritative. No Christian body formally recognized any apocryphal books as canonical before the sixteenth century.

Recognizing the canonicity of the New Testament books requires a different approach. While there is some mutual recognition among the apostles of the authority of each other's writings (e.g. 2 Pet 3:15–16), the apostolic church never provided an authoritative list of authoritative writings. The apostles themselves were aware of the problem of forged documents written under their names (2 Thess 2:2). Also, other non-apostolic books were being circulated among the churches (e.g., the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles). By the second century, heretics such as the Gnostics had begun to produce documents for which they claimed authority (the Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Thomas, etc.). The proliferation of writings forced Christian leaders and thinkers to ask which documents were genuinely inspired. Furthermore, persecution underlined the importance of knowing which books were worth giving one's life for and which were not.

Over time, Christians came to use at least four tests to determine whether a writing qualified as canonical. The first of these was the test of apostolicity. To be recognized as inspired, a document had to have been written by an apostle or by someone with a close connection to the apostolic community. Most of the books that became the New Testament were written directly by apostles. The few exceptions (Mark, Luke, James, Jude) were written by people close to the apostles. Mark is supposed to have used Peter as a direct



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source. Luke was a close associate of Paul, and he evidently had access to Mary's testimony. James and Jude were both half-brothers of Jesus, and both were seen as prominent within the early Christian church.

The test of apostolicity was simplified by the fact that the apostles had written to several churches that still possessed their writings. During the early third century, Tertullian claimed that the authentic writings of the apostles could be found in places like Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, and Rome (*Prescription Against Heretics* 36). He meant that these churches held either the original documents written by the apostles or at least that they had unmodified copies.

These churches and others had been founded by the apostles themselves. The existence of such churches made possible a second test. Before being recognized as authoritative, any document had to be demonstrably consistent with apostolic teaching. This is the argument that Irenaeus advanced against the Gnostics during the late second century.

Irenaeus argued that the apostolic churches were well known (*Against Heresies* 3.3–4). In these churches, the apostles themselves trained the first pastors, and those pastors trained their successors. The chain of pastors could be traced link by link (Irenaeus did trace it for the church at Rome). Irenaeus further argued that in his time, all the pastors in all the apostolic churches were still unified in their teaching. He reasoned that this unity of teaching could not have been contrived; it must preserve accurately the teaching of the apostles. This unity contrasted with the traditions of the Gnostics, whose teachings contradicted not only the apostolic churches but also each other. If one wanted to identify authoritative writings, all that one had to do was to compare a particular document to the universal teaching of the apostolic churches. A writing that contradicted apostolic doctrine must be rejected.

Of course, Irenaeus's approach would become weaker with each passing generation. He failed to appreciate how quickly the teaching of the apostolic churches themselves could become corrupted. Nevertheless, during the second century the presence of a live tradition among the apostolic churches provided an important brake on the adoption and canonization of heretical books.

The first two tests of canonicity are (1) apostolicity and (2) consistency with apostolic doctrine. The third test is *use*: before being recognized as Scripture, a book must have been received, recognized, circulated, and used within the apostolic churches. Of course, this test also implied that those churches preserved the book.

Paul apparently wrote some epistles that were not preserved, circulated, or widely used. He seems to have written four Corinthian letters in total. He probably also wrote a separate epistle to the Laodiceans (Col 4:16). None of these was preserved or widely circulated. This failure does not mean that

some book of Scripture was lost. Rather, these books were lost because they were not inspired Scripture in the first place. If, say, 3 Corinthians were discovered next week, Christians would not be obligated to add it to the New Testament—though they would doubtless find it interesting.

Some writings took longer for the churches to recognize and circulate than others. The anonymous book of Hebrews is an example. James and Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John were others. Questions were also raised about the book of Revelation. In time, however, the churches circulated and used these documents, and they were recognized as authoritative works. Other books such as the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas were used occasionally but never widely recognized as authoritative.

These three tests of canonicity (apostolicity, consistency, and recognition) have all been completed in the past. While the results could *in theory* be revisited at any time, *in practice* no one now is in a position to dispute the results. The canon is closed, and the Bible has a back cover.

Still, one more test of canonicity remains. John Calvin refers to this test as the "witness of the Holy Spirit." Calvin said,

The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded. (*Institutes* 1.7.4. Battles translation)

This final test should not be ignored. While it is not a proof for unbelievers, it is a real source of assurance for believers. We need have no doubt that the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments are indeed the true and only Word of God today.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
