

The Canon of Scripture

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PART ONE: THE APPROACH TO THE CANON

SECTION ONE: THE MEANING OF THE TERM

I. In General

The Greek word [for canon] is a word borrowed from the Semitic languages. One such Semitic language, Hebrew, uses the word [for canon] which means a reed. Both in Hebrew and Greek it came to mean a measuring rod or ruler. One scholar traces the development of its meaning further. He says, "From the sense of literal measurement naturally followed the metaphorical use of whether in Ethics ... or in Art ... or in language ... " [\(1\)](#) The term, canon, over the process of time came to mean, therefore, the standard or measure by which the truth or perfection or beauty of something was judged.

It is important to fix the meaning of the Greek term in our minds. The following illustrations may serve this purpose. The Classic Greek authors were as a whole, , the absolute standard of pure language, the perfect model of composition. (2) The Epicureans used with a specific philosophical meaning. Canonics was the task of seeking to find a basis or a standard by which to know what is true or false, what was worth seeking and what should be avoided. Logic and method, according to Epicurus, composed this area of study. Epictetus, the slave philosopher, used of the logical criteria, rules, or standards by which one may judge the truth or value of a thing. Finding the canon was the first step in philosophy. was also used of mathematical or astronomical lists or tables because they were the standards according to which the these sciences did their work.

II. In the Early Church

The general idea of something being a norm or standard is borne out in the biblical occurrences of (Gal. 6:16, Phil. 3:16 TV, and II Cor. 10:13-16). The Bible, however, does not use in the sense in which we will be using it in this study. This specific sense or use developed later in the history of the Christian church. Very early was used of what was genuinely Christian. 1 Clement 7:2 speaks of "the glorious and majestic *rule* of the tradition by which the Christian should live." The early creeds were "the canon of truth" or "the canon of the faith." Since this canon is really divine in origin, to canonize something was to recognize it as part of this canon: divine, sacred, holy, unconditionally reliable and authoritative.

Later still the word was used specifically of the collection of sacred writings or the list of such sacred writings. Here are some examples of this usage. The Council of Laodicea in Phrygia around the year A. D. 360 declared, "Private psalms must not be said in the church, neither non-canonical books, but the canonical books of the Old and New Covenants." Athanasius in the "Decrees of the Council of Nicea" said, "The Shepherd of Hermas is not out of the canon (In other words, its origin is not canonical. It has no place in the canon)." Athanasius in 367 in the 39th Festal epistle specifies our 27 New Testament books alone as the canon as opposed to all the other writings which some wanted to include in the New Testament.

The idea of an authoritative list or collection of sacred books is much older, however, than the application of the word, canon, to this idea. Prior to the 4th century the idea of an authoritative list of books was expressed by means of the phrase, "the Old or New Covenant." God's covenant was the final authority. Thus, to say that a book was part of the New Covenant was to assign to it supreme authority. Later canon was applied to the decisions of the Councils which formed the basis of `canon' law.

SECTION TWO: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IDEA

The summary I have just given you of the meaning of the term raises the question, Is the idea of a canon, a list of sacred writings which are looked at possessing divine authority, itself biblical? In other words, Does the Bible teach the idea of a canon? This question is even more urgent to answer in light of the fact that the term canon, is never used of a list of writings possessing final authority in the Bible.

While the term, canon, is never used of a list of sacred writings in the pages of Holy Scripture, the idea it represents is present everywhere in the New Testament. This is another case where church history has properly given us a word to describe a biblical idea. Similarly, the term, Trinity, is not itself biblical, but it brings out and summarizes a biblical idea. The idea of a canon, an official collection of sacred writings, is logically implied in any view of Scripture which regards Scripture as possessing unique, one-of-a-kind authority. This view is especially suggested by any view of Scripture which regards the Holy Scriptures as divine, infallible, and inerrant.

This kind of view is, however, the Scripture's own view of itself. The New Testament everywhere views the Old Testament not only as having unique authority, but as divine, infallible, and inerrant. This view of the Old Testament requires by the strictest logical necessity the idea of canon. The reason for this is that this view requires a clear distinction, an emphatic boundary between what is and what is not Scripture. A boundary line of this character is drawn by means of the canon, the list of those books which are different than all others in that they are divine and inerrant. Such a distinction, such a boundary line can be provided only by

the idea of canon.

This may be illustrated from one of the classic New Testament statements of Old Testament authority, Jn. 10:35. Here the assertion is made that "the Scripture cannot be broken." Other literature may be broken, may, in other words, err. To mean anything, this statement must suggest the idea of a clear boundary line between what is and what is not Scripture. Unless we know which books cannot be broken, it will be of no practical benefit to us to know that Scripture cannot be broken. This biblical doctrine of Scripture is of no help to us without a clearly understood boundary line between what is Scripture and what is not. This boundary line is drawn in the Doctrine of the Canon.

The Doctrine of the Canon of Scripture is, therefore, a key part of the orthodox doctrine of Scripture. The applications of this are many. Let me mention several of them here. First, the Doctrine of the Canon is foundational for orthodox theology. There is no more foundational doctrine than that of the Scriptures. The Canon is an essential point in our Doctrine of Scripture. We may not, therefore, think of the study of the Canon as a hobby for impractical scholars and old people who have nothing better to do. Second, orthodox theology is required to give a reasoned defense of its conclusions as to what constitutes the Canon. We as the students, preachers, and defenders of such theology are required to know what that defense is. Third, the Scriptures are adequate to direct us to such a defense. We may approach the study of Canon with the confident expectation that no matter how thorny the problems which confront us in it are, the diligent study of Scripture will provide us with satisfactory solutions. This is the necessary deduction from the doctrine of the sufficiency of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). Fourth, those who approach the study of Canon without an orthodox doctrine of Scripture will without doubt pervert this doctrine. The study of the Canon of Scripture is inseparable from the idea of divine authority. Those who have perverted the Christian idea of divine authority unavoidably make mistakes in their approach to the Canon. One way in which they often make a mistake is that wrongly define the purpose of the study of the canon. They will tell you that their purpose is to discover how the Church constituted certain books as its final authority or canon. Such a statement

of purpose starts out by denying the very idea of the Christian Canon. One may recognize divine authority. One may accept the claims of God in Scripture. But one by the very nature of the case cannot make those claims have authority. Ridderbos well says:

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. 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. (3)

We will see that many or most of the problems we face in the doctrine of the canon are solved if we are consistent with the biblical idea of the canon. This is especially true with regard to how we know that the canon of Scripture is the true canon. The biblical idea of canon demands the idea that the canon of Scripture must be in the final analysis self-attesting.

SECTION THREE: THE STEPS IN THE STUDY

A thorough overview of the doctrine of the Canon requires us to explore broad areas of Christian theology. The outline of our study of the Canon makes this clear. We have begun by giving ...

PART ONE: THE APPROACH TO THE CANON

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PART FIVE: THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE CANON

Let me say a word or two about this outline before we come to Part Two of it.

Part One really deals with several matters of introduction. I have been introducing you to the term and the idea suggested by it. Part Two takes us into the area of historical theology or the history of doctrine. In Part Two my intention is to lay out all the different positions which have grown up and been stated clearly in the history of the church. This is intended to set before us the various choices and options that have been explored in the history of doctrines. Hopefully, this will help us make wise and informed choices as we begin to draw our conclusions in the next parts of the study.

In Part Three of our studies we come to the area of Systematic Theology. Here we will directly deal with the subject of how we know that the Canon is the Canon. In other words, we will ask the foundational and epistemological question, How do we know that the orthodox and Reformed view of the limits of the canon is correct? How do we know that sacred Scripture consists of only the 39 Old Testament books and the 27 New Testament books commonly recognized by believers in the Evangelical and Reformed tradition? These questions raise the issue of the 'attestation' or 'authentication' of Scripture. Attestation refers to how something is attested or proven to be true. Authentication refers to how we know that something is authentic or proven to be what it claims to be. As you probably are assuming, the answer to these questions is closely related to the study of Apologetics.

In Part Four of our studies we examine some fundamental issues related to redemptive history or exegetical theology. Having answered the question about how we know that our canon is the right canon, we come in this part of our studies to ask in what form or by what means God gave us the biblical canon in history. The question here is, What is the relationship or connection between the redemptive-historical events recorded in the Bible and the Bible itself? How do we link the Old Testament Scriptures with God's dealing with Israel? How do we link the person and work of Jesus Christ with the New Testament? To be specific, we will be answering the challenge to the Bible which says that there is no connection between its message and the form in which that message has come to us in Scripture. Is Scripture itself scriptural? Is the Bible biblical? Does the Old Testament come to us with the seal of divine authority upon

it? Does the New Testament come to us with the approval of Jesus Christ? Is the actual character of the Old and New Testaments consistent with the teaching of the Bible? Is there internal consistency between the message and the present form of the Bible?

Part Five of our studies brings us to the area of church history. Here we will study the process by which the church accepted and received more and more officially the canon of Scripture. We will deal with the acceptance of the Old Testament canon and examine the issue of the Apocrypha. We will deal with the acceptance of the New Testament canon. Here the major issue is not, as I said before, to see how the people of God made these writings have authority. It is rather to see how the people of God more or less officially and formally accepted these writings for what they were, divinely inspired writings already having authority. The challenge being answered in this part of our studies is to see whether there is external harmony between what the Bible teaches about the canon and the actual acceptance of that canon by the church. If the canon is what the Bible says, then we should expect church history to display certain features. We will examine church history to see if there is harmony between the expectations raised by the Bible and the actual events of church history.

This survey of where we are going in this study shows that in this study I am primarily interested in a single issue. That issue is the importance of the Christian's knowing that the Canon he holds and believes is truly the right canon. My intention is to show the Christian the firm basis of his faith. In this way I hold to make solid and sure his confidence in the orthodox, evangelical, Reformed, and biblical view of the canon. To do this, I introduce the subject in Part One. I show the historical options in Part Two. I make clear the only right and intellectually solid way of attesting the canon in Part Three. In Part Four I show that the biblical view of the canon meets the standard of internal consistency. What I mean by this is that the message and the form of the Bible are consistent. I show finally that the biblical view of the canon meets the standard of external harmony in Part Five. What we would expect to happen church history, if the the biblical view of the canon is true, actually does happen. Church history is consistent with what we actually find in the history of

the church.

1. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, p.504.
2. *ibid.*
3. *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. by Carl F. H. Henry, "The Canon of the New Testament", Herman Ridderbos, (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1958) p.196.

PART TWO: THE DEBATE OVER THE CANON

SECTION ONE: THE VIEWS EXPRESSED AT THE TIME OF THE REFORMATION

With many doctrines, the positions clearly and carefully stated during the Reformation period have great significance. This is also true for the doctrine of the Canon of Scripture. Therefore we will begin by surveying the basic positions of the Reformation period. All of these positions were built on the unique divinity of the Bible. Then, we will examine the developments within the historico-critical school. The theories propounded by this school have as their common starting point the denial of the unique infallibility of the Bible. They represent distortions of the different positions of the Reformation period.

I. The Humanist View

This school is represented by such various scholars as Erasmus, Cardinal Cajetan of Rome, and Grotius the Arminian. Its common bond was its confidence in and appeal to the external evidence uncovered by historical criticism as the principle by which the true canon was to be authenticated. B.F. Westcott, though of a much later period, favors this view and embodies it when he says, "external evidence is the proper proof both of the authenticity and authority of the New Testament...." [\(1\)](#)

These humanist scholars, being so different, came to no consensus or uniform view about the true extent of the canon. Erasmus with his characteristic caution and cynicism never dares to deny the canonicity of any book of the New Testament. Nevertheless, he plants doubts plentifully with reference to the seven so-called "Antilegomena" of the New Testament. [\(2\)](#) In particular, he seems to put the Revelation of John in a the lower order or rank of a `second canon'. [\(3\)](#) Cardinal Cajetan carried Erasmus' doubts further consigning Hebrews, 2 and 3 John, Jude and perhaps the Revelation of John to a so-called second canon. [\(4\)](#) Zwingli was not untouched by Humanism and declared the Revelation of John non-canonical. Grotius, the Arminian scholar, notes and discusses the ancient doubts about the "Antilegomena" and implies that some are less than fully canonical. [\(5\)](#)

II. The Catholic View

The view of the Roman Catholic Church was formally stated and officially proclaimed at the Council of Trent in 1546. In its decree it recognized the 27 books of the New Testament, the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament (variously counted as 39, 22, or 24 books), and 6 of the Old Testament Apocrypha as canonical. [\(6\)](#) In addition it received as canonical "traditions pertaining to faith and conduct... with an equal feeling of devotion and reverence." As is well known, the principle by which Rome authenticated the true canon of the Bible was the authority of the church. The Roman church did make a distinction between the authority of the canon viewed in itself [\(7\)](#) and the authority of the canon as it concerns us [\(8\)](#), the governing idea was that the recognition of the Canon rested upon the authority of the church. [\(9\)](#)

III. The Lutheran View

One scholar summarizes Luther's position as follows: "Luther took the radical step of replacing the Church's authority with an acknowledgement of the Word of God as final authority for doctrine and life - i.e., as canon in the fullest sense of the term." "He also rediscovered the key to the right understanding of the Bible.... justification by faith." [\(10\)](#) This became the principle by which the true canon was to be authenticated. What proclaims Christ and concentrates on Him is canonical. The effect this

had for Luther on the extent of the canon is well known. He questioned the canonicity of James, "the right strawy epistle," as he called it. [\(11\)](#) While Luther later weakened his position somewhat, it is clear that at least at one time he assigned four of the "Antilegomena" to a questionable status. These were Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. [\(12\)](#)

The later Lutheran theologians and creeds abandoned Luther's doubts as to these four books. Yet Luther's `canon within the canon' would have far reaching effects.

IV. The Reformed View

Calvin and Reformed theology after him received the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament and rejected all the Old Testament Apocrypha. They also received without distinction the 27 books of the New Testament defending the canonicity of the "Antilegomena." [\(13\)](#)

The principle by which this canon was authenticated was twofold. It had an objective (or rational) and subjective (or spiritual) side. For its objective or rational authentication, Calvin appealed to the self-authenticating [\(14\)](#) witness of the Scripture to itself. For its subjective or spiritual authentication, Calvin appealed to testimony of the Holy Spirit. [\(15\)](#) This testimony actually opens our eyes and subdues our wills to the divine authority of Scripture. In Calvin's great work the *Institutes* these twin principles of authentication are clearly seen against the background of the Roman Catholic view that the Church authenticates the Scriptures. [\(16\)](#)

SECTION TWO: THE THEORIES PROMOTED WITH THE RISE OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Historical criticism exalted reason above the Bible and believed that the Bible could be criticized and corrected by means of a careful, rational study of historical evidence. This kind of biblical criticism is founded, therefore, in a denial of the unique infallibility of the Bible. It is also known as Higher Criticism, Liberalism, and Modernism. Since the orthodox view of the canon is logically close to and a result of the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible, the Doctrine of the Canon is profoundly

affected by historical criticism of this sort.

I. The Initial Destruction of the Canon in Historical Criticism

In the German circles where historical criticism had its origin J.S. Semler was regarded as the founder of the historical investigation of the Bible. It is his book entitled, *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon*, which lays in large part the foundation of historical or the higher criticism of the Bible. This is very interesting because it illustrates how foundational and important the subject of the canon of Scripture is. The book which sounded the trumpet call to start the attack on the Bible by Modernism was a treatment of the canon. This is where Liberalism began its attack on the Bible. This confirms how important it is for us to have a clear understanding of this issue as defenders of God's Word. It shows how fundamental this doctrine is. It shows that one's views of the canon of Scripture will be directly and immediately twisted by a denial of the doctrine of the full inspiration of Scripture.

What was Semler's method of investigating the canon? By means of an historical study of the Canon which laid all the emphasis on "the uncertainty, the conflict, the human strategy, ecclesiastical policy and tactics, which accompanied the assembling of the 27 books" (17), Semler denied the authority of the received canon. He taught that personal faith is not subject to any external authority. It owes faith to nothing outside of itself, but is based on the original evidence of true religious and moral knowledge. This innate knowledge is identified with the witness of the Spirit. It enables the Christian to identify the Word of God where it comes to expression in the Scripture. (18) Semler's theory has for its real result the destruction of the Canon. (19) Semler's position is basically that of the older Liberalism.

II. The Attempted Restoration of the Canon in Historical Criticism

The complete destruction of the biblical canon was the logical result of Semler's work. This bothered even some theologians who accepted the idea that reason could criticize and correct the Bible. Therefore without forsaking or giving up Semler's rationalism and its denial of biblical authority many of those who favored historical criticism attempted to

restore some kind of canon to the Christian church.

A. The Attempt of Those Who Distorted Luther's Canon within the Canon

A Lutheran theologian named Zahn reacted against the destruction of the Canon which Semler's theories involved. Though they did not abandon the way in which historical criticism put reason above the Bible, they appealed to Luther's canon within the Canon. The German motto they borrowed from Luther was *'was Christum treibet'* which means 'what preaches (or promotes) Christ'. Zahn attempted to restore an objective (external, rational, written) canon to the Church as over against the total individualism and subjectivism of the older Liberalism.

Yet Zahn's appeal to this principle is far more radical than Luther's. Later scholars, like Kummel, also appealing to Luther, taught that the books of the Bible are canonical only to the degree that they bring us into relation with the historical revelation of Jesus Christ. This exists in the central proclamation which must be established by a critical comparison of the various writings. Finding this core of truth in the New Testament, however, was still the task of a human reason not subject to the authority of the Scriptures. It is clear that Zahn and his successors have not avoided the very subjectivism (making truth a matter of one's personal feelings or opinions) which troubled them in Semler's work.

B. The Attempt of Those Who Distorted Calvin's Testimony of the Spirit

There was another group of higher critics who disagreed with Zahn and his friends. They completely rejected any attempt to find an objective, clear, rational, and written canon within the canon of Scripture. These theologians emphasized experience. The Bible is God's Word when it speaks to us. It is God's Word when we hear or experience God speaking to us through it. [\(20\)](#) This view is, of course, known as Neo-orthodoxy. It appealed to and distorted the Reformed Doctrine of the Testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is not the Word of God in this view. Rather it becomes the Word of God only when we hear God speaking to us through it "here and now" "straight down from above". [\(21\)](#) Clearly, this position also does not avoid either individualism (making truth a matter one's personal opinion) or subjectivism (making truth a matter of one's own

experience and feelings).

1. Westcott, loc. cit., p. 502.

2. The antilegomena were literally 'those spoken against'. The word refers to those seven New Testament books about which some doubts were raised in the early church period. They were Hebrews, Revelation, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.

3. Westcott, loc. cit., p.473. The technical terminology for this illogical placing of a book in a second canon is giving it deuterocanonical status.

4. Westcott, loc. cit., p.474.

5. Westcott, loc. cit., p.496. The books he questioned were 2 and 3 John, Jude, and 2 Peter.

6. Westcott, loc. cit., p.477.

7. The Latin is *quoad se*.

8. The Latin is *quo ad nos*.

9. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p.190.

10. Dutoit, A.B.; Roberts, J.H. *Guide to the New Testament*, (trans. by D.R. Briggs) (Pretoria, 1979), p.259.

11. Westcott, loc. cit., p.482.

12. Westcott, loc. cit., pp.481-483.

13. Dutoit, loc. cit., p.263.

14. The technical word for this self-authentication is *autopistia*. As the word itself suggests, it refers to the fact that the Bible attests or proves itself to be true without outside evidence.

15. The technical Latin name for this is the *testimonium Spiritus Sanctus*.

16. Note the following references in Calvin's *Institutes*: 1:7:1, 1:7:2, 1:7:4, 1:7:5, 3:2:34.

17. Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988) p.1.

18. Dutoit, p.266.

19. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History ...*, p.2.

20. Herman Ridderbos summarizes this point of view when he says, "Another group of scholars, who in principle hold to the same standpoint with respect to the canon, will not hear of such an objective canon within the canon. Instead they seek the canonicity of the canon in the fact that we repeatedly encounter the Word of God in it as an actual event." *Redemptive History ...* p. 6.

21. In his summary of Kasemann's position Ridderbos says, "As it lies before us in its naked objectivity, the canon is not the Word of God, nor is it identical with the gospel. It is rather the Word of God only insofar as it is and repeatedly becomes the gospel. The question as to what the gospel is cannot be answered by the historian. It can be decided solely by the believer who has been convinced by the Spirit and who has ears to hear." *Redemptive History ...* p.8.

PART THREE: THE ATTESTATION OF THE CANON

GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

It has already been made clear that the idea of a canon is biblical. It is a necessary conclusion which must be drawn from the unique and absolute authority assigned to the Old Testament by the New Testament. But there is also a broader sense in which the idea of a canon or of an absolute standard is Christian. At the heart of Christianity are the ideas of divine authority and divine revelation. God is the absolute standard for His people. More precisely, God's speaking is the canon of truth. Thus, the idea of canon corresponds to and grows out of divine authority, divine

revelation, and divine speaking. The authority of the Canon is, therefore, essential to the authority of divine revelation.

In dealing with this issue of the authority of divine revelation we are, however, asking and answering two somewhat distinct questions. The two questions are: Why does the Bible possess special authority? and, How do I know it possesses such authority? Christians in general have agreed that the Bible possesses innate authority because it is the Word of the living God. But a slightly different question may be asked, How do I come to know and recognize that authority? How is that authority attested to me? When this question is asked, different answers have been given to it by those who believe that the Scriptures are the Word of God. It is this question with which we are now concerned: How is the Bible attested to me as true? In other words, How do we know that the message contained in the Scriptures is divine? When we have answered this question properly, we will be able to give a basic answer to the question about how we know that our canon is the orthodox canon.

When the question of canonical authority is defined in this way it is evident that we are dealing with the subject of Christian epistemology. As such the study of the recognition of canonical authority necessarily involves applying one's view of Christian Apologetics. Any approach to the Canon which fails to appreciate the great importance and foundational character of Apologetics for the study of the Canon is rightly viewed as shallow or superficial. When writers simply assume without further thought that the study of the Canon is simply a matter of historical investigation and evidence, great theological ignorance and shallowness is displayed. The fact is that one's evaluation of the historical evidence will be profoundly affected by the presuppositions one brings to it from one's Apologetics.

The question is, How do we know that our canon is the right canon? This question is the question answered when we speak of the authentication of the Scriptures. Authentication refers to that which proves the Bible to be the Word of God. When we tell men how we know the Bible is the Word of God, we are authenticating the Scriptures. We will discuss this issue under three sections of thought.

SECTION ONE: THE ATTEMPTED BUT WRONG ANSWERS

SECTION TWO: THE BIBLICAL AND REFORMED SOLUTION

SECTION THREE: THE NECESSARY AND IMPORTANT DEDUCTIONS

SECTION ONE: THE ATTEMPTED BUT WRONG ANSWERS

I. Man attests the Canon.

This is the position of Semler and Liberalism. Among these scholars many variations were given to this position. Always, however, man's innate religious, emotional, moral, or intellectual instincts and abilities were made the rule of what was considered to be canon.

Among the many objections which may be brought against this position, one is most pointed and primary. It ignores man's fallen-ness. More precisely, it ignores or denies the noetic or intellectual effects of human depravity. The fact is that the religious, moral, and intellectual abilities which this position appeals to are not themselves infallible. Rather they are fallen in sin. The appeal to man to authenticate the canon can never be successful. A canon is by definition an infallible standard. A fallible man can never give us an infallible standard. Even worse, a fallen mind will never be satisfied to accept God's Word. The intellectual impulses of such a mind will always and forever twist God's standard if we allow it to stand in judgment of the Canon.

II. History attests the Canon.

There are those who appeal to the study of history in order to show that the Bible is the Word of God. This was the position of the Reformation Humanists like Erasmus. Many have followed them in more recent times. This view asserts that evidence outside or external to the Bible provided by historical investigation will attest to us the apostolic authorship and authenticity of the biblical canon. [\(1\)](#) B. F. Westcott favors this view and summarizes it when he says, "external evidence is the proper proof both of the authenticity and authority of the New Testament ..." [\(2\)](#)

I certainly do not wish to deny that the evidence provided by historical

investigation supports the idea that the Bible is historically genuine of the biblical canon. However, several objections may be raised against this position.

(1) It is contrary to the experience of most Christians. Very few, or none, come to believe that the Bible is the Word of God through a study of the historical evidence. Such a study has very little to do with the faith of most Christians. Does this mean that the faith of most Christians is defective or improper? Of course not!

(2) It is beyond the reach of most Christians. Many Christians do not have the intellectual capability of evaluating the thorny, historical questions regarding the scriptures. Most do not have the time to read, let alone to understand, for example, Westcott's weighty *General Survey*....

(3) It is insufficient for any Christian. What is Biblical faith? It is the conviction, the inner certainty, the confident knowledge that the message of the Bible is true (Heb. 11:1). The fact is that the historical evidence (while important, helpful, and supporting) is neither clear, nor complete enough to ground true faith. (3) At point after point judgments must be made on the basis of incomplete evidence. In support of this assertion I can only challenge the doubter to read for himself (even such a sympathetic and masterful treatment of the evidence as that presented by) Westcott.

(4) It is contrary to the nature of true faith. Ridderbos asserts, "An historical judgment cannot be the final and sole ground for the acceptance of the New Testament ... To do so [accept the New Testament on such a basis--SW] would mean that the church would base its faith on the results of historical investigation." (4) This would mean that for most Christians their faith, in reality, would be in the expert, the historical investigator himself. This would be a clear contradiction of a passage like 1 Cor. 2:4, 5.

III. The Ecclesiastical Appeal

Many appeal to the witness of the church in order to show that the Bible is the Word of God. Roman Catholicism is the key example of this

position. It affirms that the Church is able to give the Christian an infallible authentication of the Canon. In other words, Roman Catholicism claims that the church is alone able to tell us for certain and with authority that the Bible is the Word of God. Of course, any view which gives to the Church any infallible authority must be unacceptable to Protestants. Furthermore, Rome contradicts the biblical teaching that "the canon is not established by the church, but the latter is established by the canon." Thus Rome's position involves "a reversal of the redemptive-historical order." (5) Compare the statement of Paul in Eph. 2:20 that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

IV. General Objections

With the exception of the biblical and Reformed answer which we will study later, all the possible positions with regard to the attestation of the canon are variations of the positions we have laid out. For instance, the appeal to a canon within the canon to the degree that it differs from the Reformed position is a combination of man and history attesting the canon. It is, of course, not denied that each of the attempted answers mentioned above contain elements of truth. The point is that none are the whole of the truth. Each lacks the decisive perspective necessary to supply a satisfying intellectual solution to the problem. Two convincing objections which apply to the humanistic appeal (the appeal to man), the historical appeal (the appeal to history), and to the ecclesiastical appeal (the appeal to the church) must now be looked at. These objections not only refute the insufficient ways of attesting the biblical canon mentioned above, but they also make plain the direction we must go in order to find a satisfying solution to the problem.

(1) An objection which applies to both the positions given above is that the thing to which we appeal in order to attest the Bible tends to replace the Bible as one's practical authority. In other words, that to which we appeal in order to prove the Bible becomes the real authority of those who appeal to it. This lessens or weakens the practical influence of the Bible.

This problem is shown to be real in Roman Catholicism. Roman's

Catholicism's appeal to ecclesiastical authority to prove the Bible is associated with a tendency to destroy the practical authority of the Bible for Roman Catholics. This is so because in its appeal to the church to prove the Bible the Bible ceases to be the absolute standard. Similarly, historical criticism's appeal to man and history resulted in making man's interpretation of history the final authority. The Bible was then subjected to this final authority. The Bible ceased to canon except as man permitted it to be.

In each of the choices given above the Bible is to be attested by means of an appeal to a higher standard. Thus each of the attempted answers is virtually a denial of the authority of the Bible. To appeal to any external authority to prove the Bible is to make something else have more authority than the Bible. To make anything else have more authority than the Bible is a denial of the supreme authority of the Bible. Though it is helpful to make a distinction, logically, between the authority of the Scriptures for us and its authority in itself, [\(6\)](#) it should always be remembered that its authority in itself and with us is from a single cause and for a single reason. It is the Word of God.

(2) It is important to note at this point that the whole effort to discover some standard external to or outside of the Bible to prove it to be God's Word is misguided. This is the case for two reasons. First, since God has spoken and the Bible is itself the living Word of God, the highest possible authentication is the Bible's own witness to itself. Second, if we think that a divine revelation following the original giving of the Bible is necessary in order to confirm it as God's Word, there is no place to stop. This second revelation would require a third revelation to confirm it as God's Word and so on without end. If the Bible as God's voice or word from heaven does not attest itself, no amount of voices or words from heaven will ever be sufficient to attest it. Stonehouse has well said, "The only concrete [tangible--SW] form in which that authentication can come, if it is not to be derived from another objective [tangible, written--SW] revelation from the Lord of heaven, must be nothing other than the voice of Scripture itself." [\(7\)](#)

SECTION TWO: THE BIBLICAL AND REFORMED SOLUTION

The Reformed view of the self-authentication of the Scriptures must now be systematically stated and exegetically defended. The Reformed view has often been misunderstood as a subjectivistic (feeling-related) appeal to the internal testimony of the Spirit. This misconception occurs when the testimony of the Holy Spirit [\(8\)](#) is divorced from the Reformed doctrine of the self-authentication [\(9\)](#) of divine revelation. [\(10\)](#) The doctrine of the Testimony of the Holy Spirit can only be properly understood as one of a trilogy or series of three Reformed doctrines concerning the authentication of divine revelation. Furthermore, a deep appreciation of the convincing character of the biblical evidence for the Reformed solution to the problem of the authentication of Scripture is only obtained by viewing this series of three of doctrines together.

I. The Self-Authenticating Character of General Revelation

No one has more forcefully stated the significance of the self-authenticating character of natural or creation revelation than Cornelius Van Til where he said:

The most depraved of men cannot wholly escape the voice of God. Their greatest wickedness is meaningless except upon the assumption that they have sinned against the authority of God. Thoughts and deeds of utmost perversity are themselves revelational, that is, in their very abnormality. The natural man accuses or else excuses himself only because his own utterly depraved consciousness continues to point back to the original natural state of affairs. The prodigal son can never forget the father's voice. It is the albatross [a large sea bird--SW] forever about his neck. [\(11\)](#)

According to the biblical view of creation revelation man is always immediately confronted with divine revelation. God in His revelation is ceaselessly authenticating himself to man. The creature can never escape the Creator. Natural or general revelation is self-authenticating because it is the revelation of the Creator to the creature made in His image. The biblical evidence for this has already been presented. It will be merely summarized here. Psalm 19 asserts that creation has a voice. It was created by the Word of God. Now it speaks a word to men. With its voice it declares loudly, clearly, abundantly, ceaselessly, and universally the glory of the living God. Romans 1:18f. reflects on this Psalm. It goes on to

assert that such revelation leaves men without excuse because it actually imparts to them a certain knowledge of God. By it that which is known about God is made evident in them and to them. His eternal power and divine nature are clearly seen and understood by men. Thus, in a certain sense, the Apostle can assert that men know God, the law of God, and the ordinance of God that those who break His laws must die. Though they suppress the truth, they do possess the truth. This view of things is clearly confirmed by the rest of Scripture which steadfastly refuses to utilize rational argumentation to prove the existence of God. Even in Acts 17 where Paul faces complete pagans the existence and attributes are rather asserted, assumed, and declared than proven or argued. When Paul cites heathen poets in support of his testimony, it is clear that he assumes that even those barren of the light of redemptive revelation possess a certain suppressed knowledge of God that comes to distorted expression in their systematic thought.

Let it be clear what the force of the testimony of Scripture is. It is not that men may know God; nor that they potentially know God and will come to know Him if they will use their reason aright. It is not that men by natural revelation have a certain vague notion of some undefined deity. It is rather that men are immediately confronted with a clear and unavoidable revelation of the true and living God.

This distinct view of Scripture has been clearly asserted by the great teachers of the Reformed faith. Calvin frequently asserted just this in the opening pages of the *Institutes* (1:3:1, 2, 3; 1:4:1,2; 1:5:1,2,4, 11,15; 1:6:1,2). The statement of 1:5:4 is typical: "They perceive how wonderfully God works within them, and experience teaches them what a variety of blessings they receive from his liberality. They are constrained to know, whether willingly or not, that these are proofs of his divinity: yet they suppress this knowledge in their hearts." Owen has made the point even more clear with technical language. He says after citing Romans 1:19 and 2:14, 15: "And thus the mind doth assent unto the principles of God's being and authority, antecedently [prior--SW] unto any actual exercise of the discursive faculty [the capacity of men to engage in a line of reasoning--SW] or reason, or other testimony whatever." [\(12\)](#)

The self-authenticating character of Scripture has for its significant

setting the self-authenticating character of general revelation. The evidence for the self-authentication of Scripture is never given its proper weight divorced from this backdrop. John Murray has seen this relationship. "If the heavens declare the glory of God and therefore bear witness to their divine Creator, the Scripture as God's handiwork must also bear the imprints of his authorship." [\(13\)](#) This argument may, however, be put even more emphatically. It may be said that if general revelation is self-authenticating, how much more must special revelation as it is written down in the Bible be self-authenticating. The fact is that the great difference between general and special revelation is that special revelation has a far more direct and personal character than general revelation. In general revelation creation speaks to us of God. In special revelation God himself approaches us directly and personally speaking words to us. J. I. Packer teaches that the purpose of God's speaking to men is to make friends with them. He then goes on to speak of the fact that general revelation is insufficient for this end.

As against those who hold that general revelation, and 'natural religion' based on it, can suffice for man without the Bible, we must observe that Paul's analysis shows up the insufficiency of general revelation. It shows us, first, that general revelation is inadequate as a basis for religion, for it yields nothing about God's purpose of friendship with man, nor does it fully disclose His will for human life. Even Adam in Eden needed direct divine speech, over and above general revelation to make known to him all God's will. [\(14\)](#)

If the comparatively indirect and impersonal general revelation authenticated itself to men as divine revelation, how much more will direct and personal speaking by God to men in special revelation constrain recognition by its self-authentication. Owen makes this very point:

We need no other arguments to prove that God made the world but itself. It carrieth in it and upon it the infallible tokens of its original Now, there are greater and more evident impressions of divine excellencies left on the written word, from the infinite wisdom of the Author of it, than any that are communicated unto the works of God, of what sort so ever. Hence David, comparing the works of God, as to their instructive efficacy

in declaring God and his glory, although he ascribes much unto the works of creation, yet doth he prefer the word incomparably before them, Ps. xix. 1-3, 7-9, cxlvii. 8, 9 etc., 19, 20. [\(15\)](#)

The relation of the self-authentication of general revelation to the self-authentication of the Scriptures (special revelation) may also be presented by way of the following three step piece of logic or syllogism.

Major Premise: Divine Revelation is Self-Attesting.

Minor Premise: Scripture is Divine Revelation.

Conclusion: Scripture is Self-Attesting.

This syllogism depends for its truthfulness on the propriety of the major premise. The major premise is based on applying to revelation in general what is true of the self-authentication of general revelation. This is justified by the fact that general revelation is self-attesting because of the nature of the Creator/creature relationship. Since this same relation underlies all revelation, divine revelation in general must be self-attesting.

Let me illustrate how our knowledge of general revelation forms the essential context for appreciating the self-authenticating character of Scriptures. Revelation is like a jigsaw puzzle. General revelation like that we studied in Rom. 1:18-23 gives us the borders of that puzzle, but the crucial inner pieces necessary to complete the puzzle are missing. From the border pieces you can tell generally what color and shape those pieces must be, but you cannot see the picture clearly because the crucial pieces are missing. Suppose a mother and a child were putting together such a jigsaw puzzle and realized when they were almost done that several crucial pieces were missing. They look all over the house for those missing pieces and finally under a cushion on the couch they find several jigsaw puzzle pieces. When they place them in the puzzle, they fit perfectly, they are the right color, and they complete the picture perfectly. Now suppose when the father comes home, he questioned them and asked how they knew for sure that they found the right pieces. Would he be able to convince them that they had the wrong pieces? No! What could

they do to convince the father that they had the right pieces? All they could do would be to show him the puzzle and hope that he had not had such a bad day at work that he would not see the obvious fit.

It is precisely the same with the special revelation contained in the Bible. It fits with general revelation. First, it reveals the same God which men know by nature. Second, it reveals the same wicked situation which men know by nature. It teaches that men are wicked sinners doomed to death by a just God. Men, according to Rom. 1:18-2:16 know this by nature. Third, it explains why a just God continues to show common grace to such wicked sinners. According to the Bible men are aware of the fact that God continues to show goodness to them despite their wickedness and despite His holiness. The Bible explains that mystery by revealing the purpose of God to save sinners. Fourth, the Bible reveals the only way in which wicked sinners under the wrath of God can be justified by a holy God. Even though its doctrine of the Son of God coming to suffer the penalty which His people deserved is too wonderful ever to have been thought of by natural reason, yet when it is considered it is obvious that only through such a gospel can sinners be saved. These pieces, you see, fit the puzzle of general revelation perfectly. This is the reason why when the Spirit opens sinners eyes, the gospel is immediately received. Its divine truthfulness is obvious. It fits the suppressed truth which the sinner already knows.

II. The Self-Authenticating Character of the Scriptures

We have seen to some extent the background of why the Scriptures authenticate themselves to men. Now we need to see that the Scriptures indeed teach the self-authentication of Scripture. Here we come to the true heart of the Reformed solution to the problem of the authentication of the Scriptures. Holy Scripture may not be attested finally by man, history, or the church, it must be self-attested. The Scriptures are self-authenticating.

(1) The Bible everywhere asserts that the Scriptures are never to be viewed as a dead letter, but as the living Word of God (Jer. 23:28, 29; Luke 16:27-31 [\(16\)](#); John 6:63; Acts 7:38, I Peter 1:23-25, and Heb. 4:12, 13). [\(17\)](#) As the living Word of God, the Bible confronts men with the

voice of the one they know to be their Creator. Thus, the Scriptures in and of themselves demand to be believed and oblige all to whom they are ministered to believe.

(2) Without closely reasoned lengthy arguments about them or external evidence being added to them, the Scriptures are sufficient to warrant the infallible confidence in their truthfulness required for saving faith (Deut. 31:11-13; John 20:31; Gal. 1:8, 9; Mark 16:15, 16).

(3) If one does not assign to the Scriptures the ability to compel belief in and of themselves, one raises serious questions about the doctrine of the sufficiency of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). If the Scriptures are not sufficient for this most fundamental of spiritual issues, are they sufficient for anything? If they need to be supplemented by lists of evidences, then why should we deny that they need to be supplemented by works on worship and psychology etc.

Calvin's historically important statement of the self-authentication of Scripture is found in 1:7:2 and 1:7:5 of the Institutes. Parts of it deserve quotation here: "But with regard to the question, How shall we be persuaded of its divine original, unless we have recourse to the decree of the church? This is just as if anyone should inquire, How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? For the Scripture exhibits as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things of their taste." [\(18\)](#)

The Scripture, then, is self-authenticating. This means that the best way show that it true is simply to preach and teach its message boldly. Spurgeon somewhere says that he was sometimes asked how he defended the Scriptures. He responds that he does not believe that he needs to defend Scripture. Scripture is like a lion, says Spurgeon. If we let it out of its cage, it will defend itself well enough. Another interesting testimony to the self-authenticating power of Scripture comes from the pen of Archibald Alexander. This testimony is particularly interesting when it is remembered that Alexander was the father of a school of apologetics which did not properly understand the self-authentication of the Scriptures.

While spending a summer in Germantown, near Philadelphia, I was sent for to visit a young man whom I had often seen. He did not belong to my charge, but two pious ladies who did, were his friends, and had come out of the city to nurse him. He had a hemorrhage of the lungs, which left little room to hope for recovery. As he was a mild and moral man, I did not know but that he might be a professor of religion; but upon asking him a question respecting his hope, he frankly told me that he had been skeptical for many years, and had not belief that the Gospel was divine. I never felt more at a loss. The man was too weak to attend to argument, and if I could by reasoning convince him of his error, it would not be a saving faith, and he must die before this process could be gone through. I found that his infidelity afforded him no comfort in a dying hour, and that he wished he could believe in Christ. It occurred to me that the Word of God contained light and energy in itself, and that if he could not attend to the external evidences, the beams of truth might shine in upon his soul, and thus generate a saving faith by the efficient aid of the Spirit. After pointing out the probable sources of his skepticism, I requested the ladies who were attending on him to read certain portions of the Gospel to him, as he could bear it--for he was very low. This was done; and next day, when I came to see him, he declared that his doubts were all scattered, and that he had hope in Christ. Afterwards, he was never able to converse; but as far as is known he died in hope. [\(19\)](#)

III. The Testimony of the Holy Spirit to the Scriptures

A. The Basis of the Testimony of the Holy Spirit

It is now possible to understand the true meaning the Reformed doctrine called the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It has a objective, rational basis in the self-authentication of Scripture. Calvin saw this clearly: "Let it be considered then as an undeniable truth, that they who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit, feel an entire acquiescence [submission--SW] in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments from reason; but it obtains the credit which it deserves with us by the testimony of the Spirit." [\(20\)](#)

The question may arise, however, If the Scriptures are self-authenticating

what is the need of additional testimony? Further, if they are self-authenticating, how do we explain the unbelief and denial by which they are met by so many? This brings us to discuss the necessity of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

B. The Necessity of the Testimony of the Holy Spirit

The cause or necessity of the testimony is in one word, sin. Human depravity has its noetic or intellectual effects. It perverts human intellectual endeavor. It causes men to suppress the truth and so spiritually blinds them to the light of divine revelation (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:17-21; 2 Cor. 4:3, 4).

A conclusion may be drawn from the what has just been said about what makes the testimony of the Holy Spirit necessary. There is nothing wrong with the self-attesting Scriptures. There is nothing wrong with man's mental capacity to respond to the Scriptures properly. The problem is with man's heart. His heart makes his intellect suppress the truth of the Scriptures in unrighteousness. The testimony of the Holy Spirit is, therefore, simply the removal of that evil heart. He takes away the evil ethical disposition which makes men suppress the truth and, thus, blinds men to the light of divine revelation. The testimony results in an ethical transformation and not merely an intellectual operation. It does something to men's hearts before it does something to their minds. But this brings us to ...

C. The Demonstration of the Testimony of the Holy Spirit

The reality of the testimony of the Spirit to the Scriptures may be demonstrated along two lines of biblical argument.

1. From the Ethical Starting-point of All Proper Thinking (including Our Thinking about Scripture)

The Bible teaches that if man is to think right, he must be right ethically. The following passages teach that the ability to think right and by that means see the self-evidencing light of special revelation is dependent on a proper ethical disposition: Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10, 1:7, 15:33; John 3:19-21,

7:16, 17; II Tim. 2:25; II Tim. 3:7; John 10:26, 27. Faith, fear, doing God's will, repentance, all these are spiritual and moral qualities without which we cannot think right. These qualities are necessary to make the sinner stop suppressing the truth of God and stop being blind spiritually to the light of divine revelation. The Bible teaches that they are produced in sinners by means of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. All those passages, therefore, which bear upon the regenerating work of the Spirit demonstrate or prove indirectly the doctrine of the testimony. The passages supporting which speak of the Spirit's saving work are well known and need not be cited here.

2. From the Direct Statement of Scripture

As I just stated all those passages which teach that the Spirit changes a man's heart and imparts to it those ethical qualities necessary to think right indirectly support the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Some passages dealing with the work of the Spirit, however, plainly mention how by His testimony He imparts the light of truth to men. The following passages make clear that it is the Spirit that creates faith in the Scriptures through his attesting work in the soul of man through the Scriptures (Matt. 16:17; 1 Cor. 2:14f; John 3:3; 1 Cor. 2:4, 5; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13, 1 John 2:20, 21, 27). [\(21\)](#)

SECTION THREE: THE NECESSARY AND IMPORTANT DEDUCTIONS

I. Common Misunderstandings Cleared Away

A. The Misunderstanding of Subjectivism

What do I mean by the misconception of subjectivism? Those who reject the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the authenticity of the Scriptures will often object to it by saying that it is completely subjective. They think that we are saying that we know that the Bible is the Word of God because we feel it to be so in our hearts. They often go on to ask, What kind of argument is it that is based on a feeling or a personal opinion resulting from something the Spirit tells you in your heart? They also ask the Reformed if it is not arrogant and proud to say that the Holy Spirit has told them the truth, but not other Christians. [\(22\)](#)

Two answers may be given to this objection:

(1) This objection does not take into account the basis of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. This is the objective, self-authenticating character of the Scriptures as the Word of God. [\(23\)](#) It must be remembered that the self-authentication of the Scriptures is not to be divorced or withdrawn from the actual quality of the Scriptures. The self-authentication of the Scriptures is rooted in the divine perfections of Scripture, its claims, content, and attributes. C. W. Hodge summarizes its objective character when he says:

"The Witness of the Holy Spirit to the Bible, then, is not objective in the sense of being the mystical communication to the mind of a truth or proposition, nor is it a subjective inference from Christian experience. It is simply the saving work of the Holy Spirit on the heart removing the spiritual blindness produced by sin, so that the marks of God's hand in the Bible can be clearly seen and appreciated...Those who are born of the Spirit have their minds enlightened so that they are enabled and persuaded to accept the objective testimony which God gives the Bible, and to recognize immediately or behold intuitively the marks of God's hand in the Scripture." [\(24\)](#)

Our Confession also makes plain that the self-authentication of Scripture is closely related to the actual quality of Scripture. Notice how the *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* treats these qualities in Chapter 1, paragraphs 4 and 5:

4 The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.

5 We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church of God to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scriptures; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, and the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, and many other incomparable excellencies, and entire perfections

thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

Plainly, the Confession sees the excellencies of Scripture as the way in which it abundantly evidences itself to be the Word of God. All the Holy Spirit does is to enable us to accept this evidence. Notice how paragraph 5 ends by saying that this testimony or witness is borne to our hearts "by and with the Word".

(2) This objection does not take into account the unique position of God and his Word. We cannot and may not argue for the genuine-ness of the Bible, God's Word in the same way as we would for other historical events. To assume that we should and can is to commit the religious blunder of thinking God is altogether such a one as we are. The knowledge of God which general revelation imparts is of the same character. It cannot be proven like we prove other things. Those who charge the doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit with subjectivism are guilty of rationalism, attaching too much importance to human reason.

B. The Misunderstanding of New Revelation

Both the friends and enemies of this doctrine sometimes speak as if the testimony provides men with new revelation in addition to the revelation given in the Scriptures. But the testimony of the Holy Spirit is not a new revelation. It does not add to the words of Scripture. We must not conceive of this testimony as a new revelation to the effect that "the Bible is the Word of God." Kuyper comments:

It has often, however, been wrongly represented that this witness was meant in a magic sense of certain "ecstasy" or "enthusiasm," [spiritual excitement--SW] and that it consisted of a super-natural communication from the side of God, in which it was said to us, "This Scripture is my Word." Thus it has been represented by some who were less well informed, but never by our theologians. [\(25\)](#)

This view has never been the teaching of the Bible or Reformed theology. For example, the *1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* clearly speaks of the "inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the word." (1:5) The texts cited in support of this doctrine clearly distinguish between the gospel and the power by which men were persuaded to accept its claims (1 Thess. 1:5, 2:13; 1 John 2:20, 21, 27). Admittedly, it may seem strange to speak of a testimony of the Spirit to the Scriptures which adds no words to it. This does not mean that this testimony is word-less, but as was noted above, it comes in the very words of Scripture.

Here it will help us to remember that the testimony of the Spirit is primarily an ethical change He brings about in our hearts. When we remember that the testimony is primarily an ethical, rather than an intellectual operation, then it becomes clear that the testimony does not consist in any new revelation. It is simply the removal of the evil ethical attitude which hinders the proper reception of divine revelation. The testimony does not impart new light to the sinner, but new eyes.

C. The Misunderstanding of the Warrant of Faith

The testimony of the Holy Spirit is not the basis of faith. Nor is it our final authority. We must always make a distinction between the basis of faith and the source of faith. The basis of faith is the self-authenticating Word of God. The source of faith is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Before the theologians who wrote the Westminster Confession ever came to deal with the witness of the Spirit as that by which faith is produced in the heart of sinners (1:5), they made it very clear that the reason the Bible is to be believed is "because it is the Word of God." (1:4) The Bible distinguishes clearly between the basis and source of faith (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13).

It is very important to have this distinction well understood because the inspiration of the Scriptures by which they are constituted the Word of God is also a work of the Holy Spirit. It is a different work, however, than the testimony of the Holy Spirit. Thus, this distinction between the basis and source of faith is really a distinction between two different phases of the Spirit's work. Inspiration is the work of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17; 2 Tim.

3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). It is this phase of the Spirit's work that may be in mind when the Confession speaks of the "Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures." (1:10)

It is crucial to keep this distinction between two different phases of the Spirit's work clearly in mind in the context of modern theology. [\(26\)](#) For many modern theologians the Bible is merely the fallible witness to the Word of God. It becomes the Word of God when God speaks to them through it experientially. The problem is that such people if consistent will never obey the Word of God until they feel like it. Their authority is their own experience or feelings. Such a response to the Word of God is not the peculiar possession of those infected with Neo-orthodoxy. Often Evangelicals wait till they have a feeling before obeying the Word, rather than obeying it upon its own innate authority as the Word of God.

II. Crucial Deductions Put Forward

A. The Question of the Tests of Canonicity

The perspectives being discussed provide us with the proper approach to the question of whether there are tests for canonicity. [\(27\)](#) In other words, the biblical and Reformed doctrine of the self-authentication of Scripture shows us how we should think about the subject of there being tests by which both the early church and even the church today can find out if a book should be part of the canon. The self-attesting character of the Canon means that no external tests or evidence may be allowed. On the other hand, internal tests or evidence are simply part of its self-authenticating witness. There is evidence that tests taught by the Scripture itself were used by the church in some fashion in the recognition of the Canon. [\(28\)](#) Some of these internal tests and evidences will come to light in our study of the form of the canon in Part Four.

External standards of canonicity are not to be made the foundation of our faith in the biblical canon. It is, however, certainly to be expected that both the voice of history and the church will be consistent with the principles of the authority of the Canon. True, the voice of history and of the church would be insufficient to ground an infallible faith in the Canon. Yet when approached with the guidance of the self-authenticating

Word of God, the voice of history and the church will confirm the faith founded upon the rock of Scripture. Furthermore, it will do this increasingly the more closely and accurately those voices are understood.

B. The Correctness of the Presupposition of Faith

The faith imparted by the Spirit of God and founded on the self-authenticating witness of Scripture gives us the right to presuppose or accept without other evidence the truthfulness of the message of Scripture in everything. Thus, it is right to presuppose the truth of its message in our approach to the subject of its canon.

One foundational and essential truth of Christianity is found in Matt. 16:18. This passage contains the promise of Christ that He would certainly build His church on the rock of the Apostolic witness to himself. Such a promise is certainly a vital and essential aspect of even the most basic faith in the message of Scripture. We are not, then, dependent on the canonicity of Matthew when we assume its truthfulness. Any, even the most general, faith in Christ entails the belief that His church would be built on the authentic apostolic witness to himself. Without this presupposition Christianity of any kind is impossible. The necessary deduction of such a promise is that Christ's church would not fail to recognize the authentic witness to Himself when it was written down in books and letters. This assures us that the church would receive the genuine canon. The promise of Christ thus creates the presumption that the books of the orthodox and received canon are authentic. It is in light of this basic presumption that the historical evidence for the canonicity of each book of the Bible must be weighed. Simply stated, the historical evidence must never be evaluated outside of this presumption. When evaluated in light of it, the historical evidence supports, and in no case overthrows, each of the canonical books.

The reasoning behind the above paragraph needs to be clearly understood. The self-authenticating character of the Scripture and the testimony of the Holy Spirit do not immediately or by themselves settle the problem of the canon or answer every question related to it. This is recognized by many Reformed theologians, even by many who hold firmly and clearly to the importance of these doctrines for the subject of

the canon. Abraham Kuyper, for instance, remarks,

From the nature of this witness of the Holy Spirit, it follows at the same time, that it begins with binding us simply to the Holy Scripture in its *centrum* [the central part or body as opposed to the limbs--SW]. ... How far the authority, which from this spiritual centrum obtains its hold on us, extends itself later to those things in the Scripture that lie on the periphery [border or margin--SW], is a question at first devoid of all spiritual significance. ... Gradually, however, an ever more vitally organic relation begins to reveal itself between the centrum of the Scripture and its periphery, between its fundamental and derivative [something derived or obtained from something else--SW] thoughts, and between its utterances and the facts it communicates. [\(29\)](#)

E. J. Young also admits that doctrine of the testimony of the Holy Spirit of Scripture does not immediately and without further thought solve every problem related to the issue of the canon.

This doctrine is one which has been much abused and it is indeed a very doctrine. It does not mean that this inward testimony can be used as a criterion [measuring stick or standard--SW] to determine the canonicity of a certain verse or chapter or even book. [\(30\)](#)

Yet it cannot be denied that the self-authentication of the Scripture and the testimony of the Holy Spirit are the beginning point for any satisfying intellectual resolution of the canon. Both Kuyper and young go on to argue for this point. Young goes on to say, "It does mean, however, that the believer possesses a conviction that the Scriptures are God's Word, and that this conviction is a conviction which has been implanted in his mind by the Third Person of the Trinity." [\(31\)](#) Kuyper proceeds to explain in some detail how this general and central confidence in the message of Scripture imparted by the Holy Spirit powerfully and eventually leads to accepting the whole canon. [\(32\)](#) Thus, the seed of faith in Christ planted by the Holy Spirit grows into a deep faith in the whole of the received canon of Scripture. There are several features of this growth or process which will help us to understand why it happens.

First, as Christians grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus

Christ, they see more and more the unity of the Scriptures. The confession calls this the "consent of all the parts" of Scripture. Kuyper says:

We feel ourselves more and more captivated by a power whose centrum cannot be accepted without demanding and then compelling all unobservedly [without notice--SW] an ever more general consent for its entire appearance, and all its utterances. Thus it ends as *Scripture* by imposing sacred obligations upon us, as *Holy Book* by exercising over us moral compulsion and spiritual power. And in the end the connection between its form and content appears so inseparable, that even the exceptional parts of its form appeal to us, and, in form and content both, the Scripture comes to stand before us an authority from God. (33)

The path from basic faith in Christ to full faith in all the Scriptures may be illustrated in several ways. The testimony of the Spirit gives us eyes to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. He gives us eyes to see the difference between truth and error. Gradually (if we ever had any doubt) we will be able see that light shining in all the pages of Scripture. Also, an intellectual necessity will compel us on in this journey from faith in Christ to full faith in the Scriptures. Even the most undefined and basic faith in Christ assumes and accepts that in Scripture we have an authentic and true testimony about Him. Faith in Christ fundamentally requires the idea that God would not allow the truth about Christ to be lost or hopelessly clouded. Rather, any faith in Christ must believe that God will preserve the truth about Christ so that people may be saved. Any faith in Christ carries in its heart the assurance which is stated in Matt. 16:18 that Christ would build His church on the truth about Himself. Thus, the most basic faith in Christ will find itself opposed to skepticism and cynicism about the canon. It will find itself inclined to accept the received canon of Scripture.

But at this point we must come to a second class of ideas which work to confirm and hasten this process. Coming to faith in Christ is not an event which happens in isolation to any individual. More or less consciously every saved person increasingly understands that he has been separated from the world and joined to the body of Christ, the church. He will be inclined, therefore, as he grows in grace to accept the testimony of those

he sees as true Christians and reject the views of the world. This will make him especially ready to accept the testimony of the church about an issue as basic as the content of the Scriptures. Thus, the testimony of the church will confirm what his renewed heart and mind are already telling him. (34) He will be inclined to accept the received canon of the church. This is the element of truth in the appeal of many to the church in order to prove the biblical canon.

The Christian's own renewed and spiritual heart and mind is, thus, confirmed by the witness of the church. The inner certainty thus created in the Christian's mind creates in his mind a belief, presumption, or presupposition that the Scriptures are the Word of God. He approaches the study of the historical evidence with this faith. He evaluates the historical criticisms of the received canon of the church on the basis of this conviction. He finds approaching the historical evidence with this presupposition that it is consistent with his faith in the Scripture. There is nothing in the historical evidence which of necessity contradicts his faith. There is much which positively confirms it. The historical evidence, then, is not clear or sufficient enough to be the basis of his faith. Yet is clear and sufficient enough to confirm and strengthen it. This is the element of truth in the appeal to the historical evidence to prove the canon. Without fear of contradiction, it may be asserted that not one of the canonical books of the received canon of Protestants can be called into question by any existing historical evidence. This line of argument for the received canon may be diagrammed as follows:

**THE ARGUMENT FOR THE RECEIVED
CANON**

FROM

**THE SELF-AUTHENTICATION OF,
AND THE TESTIMONY OF THE HOLY
SPIRIT TO,**

THE SCRIPTURES

THE TESTIMONY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN AND TO SCRIPTURE

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∨

FAITH IN THE CHRIST OF SCRIPTURE

∨

∨

∨

EYES TO SEE THE TRUTH OF CHRIST IN ALL SCRIPTURES

∨

∨

∨

**MIND TO SEE THAT THE CHURCH IS BUILT ON THE TRUTH OF
CHRIST**

∨

∨

∨

THE CHURCH CONFIRMS THE CHRISTIAN'S FAITH

∨

∨

∨

THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE CONFIRMS HIS FAITH

∨

∨

∨

THE RECEIVED CANON IS AUTHENTIC AND GENUINE

To sum up, if even the most basic and simple faith in Christ may be founded on the self-attestation of Scripture, then we have a right to a starting-point, presupposition, or presumption which is of great importance in the study of the canon. Truly, even the most general presupposition of faith in Christ creates a presumption in favor of the orthodox and received canon.

C. The Superiority of the Books of Scripture

The self-authenticating character of Scripture assures us that there will be a gulf separating canonical writings from all others. Those writings marked by the self-authenticating divine perfections of Scripture will be radically different than other writings, especially those falsely posing as Scripture. There will be a plain distinction for any who have eyes to see it between the least of the canonical Scriptures and the best of those writings pretending to be scriptural. Owen, thus, says, "On these suppositions [assumptions or premises--SW] I fear not to affirm that there are on every individual book of Scripture.... those divine characters and criteria [evidences--SW] which are sufficient to difference them from all other writings whatever, and to testify their divine authority unto the minds and consciences of believers." [\(35\)](#)

1. R. Laird Harris, *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1957), p. 194.
2. General Survey, p. 502.
3. John Owen, *The Works ...*, (Banner of Truth Trust), vol. 4, pp. 20f.
4. Ridderbos, *Authority of the New Testament*, p. 36.
5. H. Ridderbos, op. cit., p. 36. Cf. Calvin at 1:7:2 of the *Institutes*.
6. The Latin is *quoad nos* and *quoad se*.
7. Stonehouse in *The Infallible Word*, p. 105.
8. The frequently used Latin phrase is *testimonium Spiritus Sanctus*.
9. The frequently used Latin phrase is *autopistia*.
10. Ridderbos, ANT, pp. 9ff.
11. Van Til in *The Infallible Word*, pp. 274, 275
12. John Owen, pp. 84, 87, 88, of vol. 4 of his *Works*.

13. Murray on p. 46 of *The Infallible Word*.

14. J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken*, pp. 54, 55)

15. John Owen, op. cit., p. 91.

16. Note Owen's comment on Luke 16:27-31 in vol. 4 of his *Works*, pp. 75, 76. Here are Owen's remarks: "But is it of this authority and efficacy [power--SW] in itself? See Luke 16:27-31, "Then he said" (the rich man in hell), "I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him: (Lazarus, who was dead) "to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." The question here between Abraham and the rich man in this parable,--indeed between the wisdom of God and the superstitious contrivances [devices--SW] of men,--is about the way and means of bringing those who are unbelievers and impenitent unto faith and repentance. He who was in hell apprehended that nothing would make them believe but a miracle, one rising from the dead and speaking unto them; which, or the like marvelous operations, many at this day think would have mighty power and influence upon them to settle their minds and change their lives. Should they see one "rise from the dead," and come and converse with them, this would convince them of the immortality of the soul, of future rewards and punishments, as giving them sufficient evidence thereof, so that they would assuredly repent and change their lives; but as things are stated, they have no sufficient evidence of these things, so that they doubt so far about them as that they are not really influenced by them. Give them but one real miracle, and you shall have them forever. This, I say, was the opinion and judgment of him who was represented as in hell, as it is of many who are posting thither apace [hastening there speedily--SW]. He who was in heaven thought otherwise; wherein we have the immediate judgment of Jesus Christ given in this matter, determining this controversy. The question is about sufficient evidence and efficacy to cause us to believe things divine and supernatural; and this he determines to be in the written word,

"Moses and the prophets." If he that will not, on the single evidence of the written word, believe [it] to be from God, or a divine revelation of his will, will never believe upon the evidence of miracles nor any other motives, then that written word contains in itself the entire formal reason of faith, or all that evidence of the authority and truth of God in it which faith divine and supernatural rests upon; that is, it is to be believed for its own sake. But saith our Lord Jesus Christ himself, "If men will not hear," that is, believe, "Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead," and come and preach unto them,--a greater miracle than which they could not desire. Now, this could not be spoken if the Scripture did not contain in itself the whole entire formal reason of believing; for if it have not this, something necessary unto believing would be wanting, though that were enjoyed. And this is directly affirmed,--"

17. Note Owen's comment on Luke 16:27-31 in vol. 4 of his *Works*, pp. 75, 76.

18. Edwards echoes the thoughts of Calvin and Owen, vol. 2, p. 16, of the two volume set of his works.

19. A. Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, p. 233.

20. 1:7:5 of the *Institutes*

21. Cf. John Murray's exposition of these passages pp. 47-54 of the *Infallible Word*.

22. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History* ... pp. 9, 10. Ridderbos ably summarizes the objections of Zahn who represents this view: "Zahn accuses those who are Reformed of pretending to have an infallible criterion of canonicity in their hearts, in the witness of the Holy Spirit, on the basis of which they believe they can state in their confessions which books do, and which do not belong in the canon. Zahn states further that such an appeal to the witness of the Holy Spirit is a denial of the uncertain-ties that have arisen in the history of the canon. Not only does it appear to make the Holy Spirit the exclusive possession of the Reformed, but also conflicts with the character of the witness of the Holy

Spirit as described in the New Testament."

23. Cf. the statement of Calvin cited above from *Institutes* 17:5

24. *Infallible Word*, p. 170.

25. Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, p. 557.

26. John Frame, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, pp. 222 and 223. Frame remarks: "In modern theologians like Barth, however, this distinction loses its sharpness. For them, first, inspiration in the orthodox sense does not exist; God does not place His words on paper ... Thus, in modern theology the internal testimony replaces the traditional concept of inspiration. It was the internal testimony, not inspiration, in this view, that motivated the original writing of Scripture, and it is the internal testimony (presently occurring, as we read and hear), not inspiration, that grounds our faith in Scripture."

27. What I am calling the tests of canonicity are often referred to in Latin as the *criteria canonicitas*, the *notae canonicitatis*, or the *principia canonicitatis*.

28. Dutoit, loc. cit., pp.144ff.

29. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, p. 560.

30. E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 32.

31. *ibid.*

32. Kuyper, loc. cit., pp. 560-563.

33. Kuyper, loc. cit., p. 560, 561.

34. Kuyper, loc. cit., pp. 561, 562. Here are Kuyper's words with regard to this process of accepting the witness of the church to the received canon: "With this conviction, which is now his own for good and always, he, who has been set free from the veil darkly hung between, does not stand alone, but feels himself assimilated by the illuminated consciousness which in

the communion of the saints is distinguished from the natural consciousness of the world. This assimilation becomes stronger, according to the greater vitality of the child of God in him, by which he is evermore being changed into the image of the Son of God. Thus there originates a communion of consciousness not merely with those round about us, but also with the generation of the saints of former ages, affinity of life with the saints that have gone before, unity of soul-conceptions with the martyrs, with the fathers of the Church, with the apostles, and so at length with Christ Himself and with the faithful of the Old Covenant. In the life-consciousness of that sacred circle the positive conviction prevails, that we have a graphically inspired Scripture, on which we lean and by which we live; and that this is not contingent, nor accidental, but necessary. This faith in the Scripture is found as an indispensable and an entirely natural component part in the life-consciousness of this circle."

35. John Owen, *Works ...*, vol. 4, p.107.

PART FOUR: THE FORM OF THE CANON

GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

When God speaks, he speaks self-authenticatingly. It is the self-authentication of the Scriptures which is the basis and source of our confidence that we have the genuine, biblical canon. In Part Four of our studies we come to ask different questions, How has God spoken? In what historical form has he spoken? It is still necessary to ask these questions. Though they do not tell us the primary basis or source of our confidence in the Scriptures, they do in several ways tend to increase our understanding of, confirm our faith in, and defend our view of the canon of Scripture. Let me open up the importance of studying the form of the canon so that you will appreciate the value and necessity of the extended study which we are now about to begin.

First, studying the form of the biblical canon will help us to understand

more clearly the teaching of Scripture itself. Giving to His people a written revelation of His Word was a vital part of God's working in redemptive history. The record of this is an important feature of the Bible itself. Without a clear knowledge of the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament, our understanding of the Scriptures as a whole will be seriously weakened. Thus, by understanding the prophetic and apostolic form in which God gave to His people the revelation of His will our insight into the Scriptures will be deepened.

Second, Christians sometimes ask the important question, How did we receive our Bibles? Others may challenge Christians by asking what the connection is between the message of the Bible and its present form. They may suggest that the Bible is a disorganized, random, and confused collection of books. They may say that the biblical canon is itself not biblical. They may assert that our loyalty should be God and Jesus not to a set of books. They may call our Christianity, 'bookish, letterish, and legalistic,' because we reverence the biblical canon. Only an understanding of the form of the biblical canon will enable the Christian to answer these challenging questions by showing the unbreakable connection between salvation and the Bible, redemption and revelation.

Three, an understanding of the form of the biblical canon will help us see why some books can make no claim to being a part of the biblical canon. Understanding the form of the biblical canon may not help us prove that these books are canonical. Yet it will help us show that some books are not. This will be an important point to remember as we study the Apocrypha's claim to be part of the Old Testament. It will also help us in seeing why some books can make no claim to being a part of the New Testament.

Before we come to our study of the form of the canon, I must make plain something that is only stated indirectly in the preceding paragraphs. We do not come to study the prophetic and apostolic form of the biblical canon to put ourselves in a position to prove the biblical canon. Many good men have attempted to show that the New Testament is the true and authentic Word of God by proving its apostolic authorship. [\(1\)](#) The apostolic form of the New Testament is important for understanding and defending the New Testament canon. We have in the preceding

paragraphs briefly stated why that is the case. Yet the apostolic form of the New Testament canon and the prophetic form of the Old Testament canon can never by themselves answer the basic epistemological questions related to the authentication of Scripture. The evidence is not complete enough to do this. Furthermore, it is not the kind of evidence needed to do this. Finally, the biblical teaching with regard to these issues was never intended to answer the questions dealt with in Part Three of these studies on the canon.

With all this said by way of introduction, we come now to the questions related to the form of the biblical canon. We shall deal with them in three sections of thought.

SECTION ONE: CANON, COVENANT AND COMMUNITY--THE FORM OF BIBLICAL CANONICITY

SECTION TWO: MOSES AND THE PROPHETS--THE FORM OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

SECTION THREE: JESUS AND THE APOSTLES--THE FORM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

SECTION ONE: CANON, COVENANT AND COMMUNITY--THE FORM OF BIBLICAL CANONICITY

I. A Helpful Idea

Meredith Kline's name has become almost synonymous with the idea that the biblical covenants find their formal origin, their secular model, in the ancient near eastern suzerain treaties. [\(2\)](#) A suzerain was an overlord or king who conquered and ruled over other peoples. Kline describes such treaties as follows, "In these treaties an overlord addressed his vassals [servants of a high king--SW], sovereignly regulating their relations with him, with his other vassals, and with other nations." [\(3\)](#)

Kline has attempted to establish this theory at length in his books, *The Treaty of the Great King* and *By Oath Consigned*. I do not follow Kline in all the applications he makes of this thesis. Yet I see no reason to deny his

basic idea. Rather, I see good reasons to approve Kline's basic thesis. Several striking parallels with biblical canonicity show the correctness of Kline's thesis and manifest its significance for canonical study.

(1) There is a great and varied emphasis in these treaties on the inscripturation or writing down of their provisions and the central role of this writing in the administration of the treaty. [\(4\)](#) This is strikingly parallel to the emphasis of the Pentateuch on the writing and depositing of the covenant in a sacred place. [\(5\)](#) Notice Exod. 24:4-7, 12, 13; 25:16, 34:27, 28; 40:20; Deut. 31:24-26.

(2) There is the specific presence of what Kline calls the "inscriptional curse." [\(6\)](#) This is again strikingly parallel to the biblical curses on those who would alter the Scriptures. [\(7\)](#) Notice Deut. 4:2; 12:32; 5:22; Rev. 22:18,19.

(3) There is also a striking parallel between the period in which such treaties flourished and the formative era of the Old Testament canon. The documents Kline refers to flourished in the 14th to 7th centuries B.C. This is, of course, precisely the period in which the Old Testament canon was formed. [\(8\)](#)

II. Its Significant Applications

A. For the Origins of Canonical Scriptures

Kline's idea destroys the higher critical view of the Old Testament canon. Kline summarizes the views of Fohrer. His views may be taken as summarizing the higher critical tradition. He asserts that the Old Testament canon was formed between 100 B. C. and A. D. 100. [\(9\)](#) The presence of suzerain treaties in the 14th century B.C. with their essential emphasis on writings which possessed authority as the standard of life certainly weakens the higher critical assigning of the beginnings of the Old Testament canon to the 7th century B. C. and even later. [\(10\)](#)

B. For the Similarity of Canon and Covenant

Not only does Kline's thesis establish early historical evidence for the idea

of canonical writings, but it teaches that the origin of a written canon is found in the biblical idea or concept of the covenant. A written canon is essentially related to the biblical presentation of the Mosaic Covenant. It is also essentially related to the historical background of the Mosaic Covenant. We may, therefore, speak of the equivalence of Canon and covenant. The covenant is the standard or rule or canon of the life of the people of God. The biblical idea of the covenant (as well as its historical background in the suzerain treaties) contains the idea of formal, legal, or binding relationship. Hence covenantal writings have authority by nature, formally and legally. They are in other words canonical Scripture.

The close association of canon and covenant should not surprise us. Our traditional designations of the Bible as Old and New Testament (Covenant) point to this association. They were perhaps more proper than we may have realized. [\(11\)](#) This traditional language reflects the language of the early church. It used the term, covenantal, to describe what was canonical before the term, canonical became current. Prior to the 4th century the idea of an authoritative list of books was expressed by the phrase, the Old and New Covenants (testaments). [\(12\)](#) Before this Paul himself spoken of the reading of a divine covenant (2 Cor. 3:14, 15). In this passage the Old Covenant equals the Old Testament Scripture as a whole.

The reference of Paul above points up the accuracy of Kline's idea that the Old Testament Scriptures as a whole are simply expansions of the different aspects of the original covenant with Israel. The frequent references to the whole Old Testament as simply "the law" also confirms this idea. [\(13\)](#)

C. For the Association of Canon and Community

The relationship between canon and covenant must be completed by noticing the association of canon, covenant and community. Perhaps the best way to introduce this point is to ask the following question. Why do the canonical Scriptures have their beginning in the Mosaic covenant and not in the earlier covenants mentioned in God's Word? The fact is that while the Bible contains the records of God's earlier covenantal dealings its beginnings are to be traced to Moses and the Old Covenant. Why?

The answer to this question is that it was the appearance of a national covenant community which necessitated the canonical Scriptures. In the time of Abraham the covenant community was a family under the personal leadership of Abraham. A written code for the ruling of the community was not necessary for it to be governed. Soon, however, the covenant people became too large to be governed by the direct leadership of one man. When the covenant people became a nation, there was no longer a single father to govern the whole nation. Then a written code or canon was needed. Only by a public, written rule could the corporate life of the community be effectively governed. This was the reason for a written canon. It has several important implications.

(1) The covenantal canon is the authoritative rule for the community imposed by its covenant lord. As such it in no sense derives its authority from the community. This contradicts the Roman Catholic doctrine idea of the church authenticating the canon.

(2) The covenantal canon assumes and presupposes the community ordered by it and existing under its authority. "Canonical authority is not derived from the community, but covenantal canon connotes [intimates or suggests or implies--SW] covenantal community." [\(14\)](#) This means that the covenantal canon is always given to the covenant community and recognized by it.

One of the marks or necessary conditions of canonicity must be the recognition of a writing by the covenant community to whom it was originally given. The idea of writings only gradually gaining canonical status centuries after their writing is foreign and alien to Christianity. If any writing only gained such authority centuries after its being written, this would clearly prove that it was not canonical.

This is an element of truth in the Roman Catholic idea that the church attests the canon. It is true that no book could be considered canonical which was not historically recognized as such by the covenant community. This means that Old Testament books must have been accepted as canonical by the Jews, and New Testament books must have been accepted as canonical by the church.

(3) The distinctive and peculiar purpose of the canon is to order the life of God's people. It is to formally structure and officially order the corporate life of the people of God that the canon is given. Such is the whole reason for the existence of canon. This rebukes those who wish to regard the doctrine of the church as of little importance or as a matter of indifference. The Bible was given precisely because the church is to be a formally and legally ordered community. The Bible is the constitution of the visible church. Contempt for the visible church or its ordering and government is contempt for the canon itself. The Bible is given to be the 'regulative principle' of the church.

(4) We are about to turn to the actual historical means or forms in or through which God spoke to his people. The previous emphasis on the self-attesting character of the Word of God raises this question, Why did God bother to set up the prophetic institution in the Old Testament period and the apostolic institution in the New Testament period? Could he not have spoken randomly to whomever He sovereignly pleased? Since His Word is self-attesting, why is the existence of clearly defined historical institutions through which he would speak to his people necessary. Here the covenantal character of canon helps us. Because His purpose was to govern his people, He confirmed and completed the self-attesting power of His Word by giving it through institutions which were publicly known. These previously constituted institutions confirmed the authority of His Word for his people, decreased the ability of sinful men to deny His Word, and left men without excuse.

SECTION TWO: MOSES AND THE PROPHETS--THE FORM OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

Preface:

For the bulk of this material I am indebted to R. Laird Harris' book *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, especially ch. 7, "The Determining Principle of the O.T. Canon." Though Mr. Harris does not see clearly the importance of the testimony of the Holy Spirit in attesting the canon, he does give clear and correct teaching about the form of the Old Testament canon.

I. Stated

What historical form or structure did God use in speaking to Israel? What public, well-known institutions did God use to communicate His covenant revelation to Israel? By what formal standards did Israel recognize that word? The answer to such questions is that God spoke to Israel through Moses and the Prophets. Israel recognized that word in Moses and the Prophets. God was speaking in Moses and the Prophets. This means that not merely their words, but their writings would be authoritative. [\(15\)](#) The testimony of the Old Testament is that both Moses and the prophets did write. The view I will defend here is that these writings were confirmed and thus recognized as canonical not only because of their divine perfection but also because they were authored by Moses and the Prophets, divinely endorsed and approved spokesmen. The mere fact that a writing was authored by Moses or the prophets in their position as God's spokesmen confirmed its contents to be canonical. This view is proven and explained in the following points.

II. Explained

A. Moses

The starting point of Old Testament canonicity is Moses. Moses was accredited and endorsed to Israel repeatedly by miraculous manifestations of redemptive power. Notice, for instance, Exod. 4:1-9, 27-31. Thus Moses was recognized as canonical by Israel. Naturally, as God's known spokesman Moses' official writings would be regarded as possessing the authority of divine revelation. The Bible testifies that Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament. This testimony consists of "the claims of the books themselves, the evidence of the later writings, and the assurances of Christ". [\(16\)](#) It is unnecessary to give this evidence in detail here. After summarizing the Old Testament evidence that Moses wrote these books and that they were received as authoritative, Harris concludes that the determining principle or deciding fact for the canonicity of the Pentateuch was that Moses wrote it. [\(17\)](#)

Moses is important not only as the one through whom God began his revelation to Israel. It was also through Moses that the means or

instrument of God's continuing revelation to Israel was instituted and regulated. That means was the prophetic institution (Deut. 18:9-22). So far as we know, the only divinely instituted and regulated means for continuing revelation in the Old Covenant was the prophetic institution.

B. The Prophets

1. Its Institution

Deut. 18:9-22 is the key passage with regard to the institution of the prophets in Israel. Some, however, give to this passage a meaning which applies only to the person of our great prophet, Jesus Christ. E.J. Young argues at length against this. He says that Deut. 18:9-22 is not exclusively messianic--referring to the Messiah. Rather, he argues that it forms the basis of the prophetic institution in the nation of Israel. [\(18\)](#) I agree with Young that the messianic reference is not to be doubted. The New Testament is clear on this point. Yet the following arguments support a reference to the prophetic institution in Israel:

(1) The immediate context points to this. Verses 9-13 in Deut. 18 give details about the forbidden sources of supernatural information or revelation used by the nations of Canaan. Verses 14 and 15 connect with this by means of the double command "you shall not listen (to the diviners, etc)... you shall listen (to God's prophet)." The connection is probably that God will supply a source of continuing revelation to Israel so that the unlawful sources used by the Canaanites will not be a strong temptation. This theme points to a reference to the prophetic institution.

(2) The wider context also points to such a reference. The whole surrounding context deals with institutions which would be a part of the promised land in the near future. Deut. 16:18-17:13 speaks of the appointment of judges. Deut. 17:14-20 speaks of the appointment of a king. Deut. 18:1-8 legislates for the levitical priesthood in the promised land. Deut. 18:9-22 then speaks of the raising up of prophets. It would be un-natural in such a context to make this passage refer only to the distant arrival of Christ.

(3) The reference to the prophetic institution is necessary to explain the

existence of the prophetic institution. This institution is so prominent in the later history of Israel that we expect some explanation of it. If Deut. 18:9f. is not this explanation, there is none in the Old Testament. [\(19\)](#)

(4) The test of verses 20-22 points this way. The giving of a test in these verses suggests that the Israelites would often have to evaluate the claims of a man to be a prophet of the true God. It seems un-natural in light of this test to think that there would be only one true prophet, the Messiah. One difficulty with this interpretation would be that many of the Old Testament prophets did pass this test. If this passage is speaking of a test for the one, true prophet, the Messiah, then their passing the test would make each of them this prophet-Messiah. This, of course, cannot be true.

(5) The evident reference of Luke 11:50, 51 to Deut. 18:19 points to this conclusion. There seems to be a reference in the words (literally), "may be required of this generation," to the threat against those who reject a true prophet in Deut. 18:19, "I will require it of him." If this reference is, indeed, present then Jesus in Luke 11 is interpreting Deut. 18 as a reference to "all the prophets" (Luke 11:50).

(6) The words of I Peter 1:11 state that it was the Spirit of Christ who spoke in the prophets. It is possible that Peter is consciously blending together the two interpretations of Deut. 18 we are discussing. If this is true, it supports the position. We have, then, in 1 Pet. 1:11 a biblical harmony of these two interpretations. Even if this is not so, it enables us to harmonize a double reference to the Messiah and the theocratic prophetic institution. [\(20\)](#)

2. Its Regulation

The regulation of the prophetic institution is, then, spoken about in verses 20-22 of Deuteronomy 18. The words of the prophet of God are to be obeyed on pain of divine judgment. The false prophet is to be put to death. Now at this point in the passage an important *canonical* question is raised. "How shall we know the word which the Lord has spoken?" Only one answer is given in this passage, but a comparison of a parallel makes plain that there are two answers to this important question: (1) The first mark of a canonical prophet is that his predictions are always

accurate (Deut. 18:22). (2) The second mark of a canonical prophet is that his teaching is consistent with the Mosaic covenant. Notice Deut. 13:1-6. Note that this passage makes clear that both marks are essential if one is to be considered a canonical prophet. This second mark makes clear that the prophets were distinctly secondary to Moses in their canonical role and dignity. Notice Num. 12:5-8 which confirms this. This, however, does not lessen the absolute authority of their message. Deut. 18:15, 18, 19 makes this clear.

III. Confirmed

Several things confirm all that has been said about Moses and the Prophets being the means through which God spoke His Word to Israel.

A. If this prophetic institution was not the sole source and test of the canonical writings of the Old Testament, the simple fact is that we do not know what the source of any further revelation would be. [\(21\)](#) There is no other revealed means of continuing revelation from God in the Old Testament. There is no other canonical mechanism hinted at.

B. The fact that the formation of the Old Testament canon was concluded with the cessation of prophecy in Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi points to this institution as the key to canonicity in Israel.

C. The completion of the canon with the cessation of prophecy was understood by the Jews. During the period between the Old and New Testaments it was understood that the canon was completed when the spirit of prophecy departed from Israel. Harris cites four witnesses:

That his was the view of the inter-Testamental period is witnessed not only by I Maccabees, in which the defiled stones of the Temple are commanded to be put aside "until a prophet should arise" (I Macc. 4:46; cf. 9:27; 14:41), but also now by the Dead Sea manual of Discipline, which looks forward to the time of the "coming of a Prophet and the anointed ones of Aaron and Israel." In the meantime, the Torah and the previously mentioned words of the prophets and the rule of the community shall obtain. Much the same idea is expressed somewhat later by the statements of Josephus, who declared that the prophets wrote from the

days of Moses to Artaxerxes very particularly but hath not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there hath not been an exact succession of prophets since that time." Similar is the Talmudic reference, "After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from israel." [\(22\)](#)

D. The terminology of the New Testament and the Judaism which existed in the period between the Old and New Testaments points to the prophetic institution as the sole source of Old Testament canonical Scripture after Moses.

(1) Inter-testamental Judaism regarded all of the books outside the law as the prophets. [\(23\)](#)

(2) The New Testament most commonly designates the Old Testament as having two parts the law (or Moses) and the prophets. [\(24\)](#) Notice Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; Luke 16:16; John. 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom. 3:21; Luke 16:29, 31; 24:27; Acts 26:22.

(3) The New Testament designates the Old Testament simply as the prophets. Notice Matt. 26:56; Luke 1:70f. (Note the quotation of the Psalms.); Luke 18:31; 24:25f; Acts 2:30; 3:21; 7:52 (There is a possible reference to Moses here.) 2 Peter 1:20, 21 (According to Warfield this is a reference to the whole Old Testament.).

E. There is the explicit testimony of the Old Testament that most of its books were in fact written by prophets. There is no evidence that any of the books beside the five books of Moses were written by anyone who was not a prophet. [\(25\)](#) The Psalms and Daniel are frequently classed among the writings rather than the prophets. Yet there is biblical testimony that Daniel (Matt. 24:15), David (Acts 2:30) and Asaph (2 Chron. 29:30) were prophets. Solomon, the writer of several other of the books of the Old Testament canon often classed as non-prophetic, was also a prophet. At least, there are good arguments for this. [\(26\)](#)

IV. Cleared

A. An objection to this view of the form of the Old Testament canon is

often raised on the basis of the common threefold division of the Old Testament canon. (27) The ancient Jews often divided the Old Testament into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Why the third division usual among the Jews, it may be asked, if all were prophets? Several answers may be given to this objection.

(1) The threefold division rests on a distinction between the office of prophet and the gift of prophecy. For, instance, E. J. Young makes this distinction in defending the threefold division and denies that David, Solomon, and Daniel were prophets. (28) Yet David, Daniel, Asaph are called prophets in the Bible. The qualifications for the prophetic office laid down in Deuteronomy 18 were possessed by each of these and Solomon as well. (29)

(2) Harris argues that the threefold division of the canon is not the oldest one. (30) Furthermore, its boundaries are fluid and very vague in the earliest evidence. At various times Daniel, Ruth, Lamentations, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah were placed in the prophets rather than the writings. Josephus places only four books among the writings. These were probably Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs.

(3) The only possible biblical testimony to this division is Luke 24:44 where the reference is to the "law of Moses, and.... the prophets, andthe Psalms." When this single reference is placed over against the numerous references to a twofold division made in the New Testament, and the acknowledged prophetic status of several of the authors of the Psalms in the Bible, there is no reason to regard it this single reference as proof of a threefold division of the Old Testament. The Psalms may be singled out in this passage for many other reasons. This verse may only be a recognition of their distinctive character as hymns or psalms. Perhaps the specific mention of the Psalms is due to the fact that they are peculiarly prophetic of Christ and His work. This interpretation would make sense in light of the theme of the passage.

(4) The threefold division rests on the assumption that the books falling into the division known as the writings were not written by prophets. There is no evidence for this. In fact, as we have seen, there is much evidence against it.

B. Another objection against this view of the structure and divisions of the Old Testament is that it implies that certain men were canonical and infallible. This is an objection or problem which also confronts us in our treatment of the Apostolate. It is important, therefore, to discuss it.

It must be remembered in the first place that this objection would destroy almost everything the Bible teaches about prophets and apostles being the spokesmen of God. It is clear that these men claimed for their words the authority of God (Deut. 18:18-22; 1 Cor. 14:37). Any theory which destroys this authority or our ability to confidently trust any of their statements as certainly true must be wrong. Thus, any biblical view must assign canonicity and infallibility in some sense to these men.

It is not maintained that the canonical men of the Old Testament were sinless or infallible in all they did or said. Some of their words and actions were private and personal. If Moses wrote a shopping list, it would not be canonical. Some of their words and actions were clearly sinful. Moses sinned even in his public ministry. Solomon followed other gods. We hear of a prophet who lied and of prophets who disobeyed.

These things do not contradict the canonicity and infallibility of these men *in their official ministry and teaching of God's Word.* [\(31\)](#) This distinction between these men considered privately and these men considered officially is indicated in Deut. 18. There the prophet's infallibility is limited to what he spoke *in Jehovah's name*. Notice especially vv. 19, 20, 22. This distinction is also implied in Matt. 16: 18 and Eph. 2:20 where the church is said to be built on Peter and his fellow apostles. The church is not built on the apostles personally and privately, but on them in terms of their public ministry and official teaching about Christ.

Furthermore, it is true that these men could occasionally sin in their public ministries. Moses was rebuked by God and admitted it. Peter was rebuked by Paul and admitted it. God carefully guards His Word so that it is not misrepresented by the sins of His servants. Notice also that neither Moses, nor Peter claimed divine authority for their sins. They did not verbally lie about what God had revealed to them. They simply acted in a way inconsistent with God's Word. Even when this happened, God

publicly rebuked them. We may assume, then, unless the official words and actions of these men are contradicted by sufficient authority, that they are canonical and infallible. *Canonical men are infallible in their official ministry except where they are contradicted by sufficient authority.*

SECTION THREE: JESUS AND THE APOSTLES--THE FORM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Preface:

Of much help here to me was Herman Ridderbos' book, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*. [\(32\)](#) Part 1 is excellent. Part 2 is scarred by his acknowledgment that there may be error in the Scriptures. This admission of error in the Scripture seems inconsistent to me with many things that Ridderbos teaches in this book and elsewhere. It is difficult for me to understand this. Also very helpful is his article in *Revelation and the Bible* entitled, "The Canon of the New Testament". [\(33\)](#)

Introduction:

A. The Question: What has Christ to do with the New Testament canon?

Christ (or the gospel of Jesus Christ) is the way in which God spoke to us in order to give us the New Testament canon. Mark 1:1 speaks of "the gospel of Jesus Christ". Heb. 1:1, 2a asserts, "He has spoken to us in his Son." Dutoit says, "Jesus Christ is the canon, both as the one who proclaims and as the one who is proclaimed We must state quite categorically that in the case of the New Testament canon we are concerned first and foremost not with a book, but with a person - Jesus Christ." [\(34\)](#) No golden tablets have fallen from heaven to be our authority. Our canon is the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is our canon. Yet He wrote no books. It is this fact which explains Ridderbos' statement that, "Any interpretation that seeks to connect the history of redemption and the canon of the New Testament at first sight can appear to be forced." [\(35\)](#) How, therefore, shall we come into contact

with the gospel of Jesus Christ? How do we bridge the gap from Jesus Christ--his birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and out-pouring of the Spirit--to the book we call the New Testament?

B. The Answer: The answer is the apostolate. [\(36\)](#)

The apostolate came into being with and by Jesus Christ. It occupied an important and clear place in redemptive history.

1. The apostolate came into being with Jesus Christ. Matthew, Mark, and Luke give the account of its origin great prominence in their gospels. All record the appointment of the 12 and give a listing of their exact names.

2. The apostolate occupied an important place in redemptive history. For instance, Jesus likens their sending to His own (John 20:21). The sending of Jesus by the Father is, however, a redemptive-historical event frequently reflected upon in John's gospel (John 3:17, 34; 5:36; 5:38; 6:29; 6:57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25). Just as the sending of the Son of God was a once for all redemptive event, so also is the sending of the Apostles! Thus, "the apostles were taken up into the redemptive act of God..." [\(37\)](#) It is this apostolate which bridges the gap between Jesus and the New Testament canon.

JESUS-----{APOSTLES}-----N.T. CANON

C. The Difficulty: When this solution is stated, a difficulty immediately confronts us. Who made up this apostolate of redemptive history? This question must be asked because the term apostle is used in several ways in the New Testament, sometimes not strictly in the sense we are using it. It will be necessary, then, to examine the identity of the apostolate in the first place and secondly, to take up the authority of the apostolate.

I. The Identity of the Apostolate

A. The Original Apostolate

Any examination of the apostolate and its identity must surely begin with the twelve. The identity of this apostolate is most easily approached by asking the question, What were the qualifications for being included in

this apostolate? These qualifications no place come more clearly in view than in Acts 1 and 2.

As we come to Acts 1, it may be necessary to refute the interpretation that sees Peter and the apostolic company as acting improperly in appointing a twelfth apostle. This interpretation is usually brought forward in the interest of the Pauline apostolate. Paul, some say, was really the twelfth apostle. The misdirected character of this interpretation will come out increasingly in our examination of the passage. Two objections to this interpretation may, however, be raised here. First, it must be noted that the apostolic position of Peter and the other ten apostles in itself validates their action. It is to be noted that the Spirit had already been given them (John 20:21) and that they had already been appointed to this responsible position. Second, divine authority confirms their action on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit comes upon Matthias, as well as the original 11 (Acts 2:1-4,14,37; 6:2).

1. The first qualification for the Original Apostolate is stated in verses 21 and 22. One must have been a disciple of the Lord Jesus from the beginning of the gospel, the baptism of John, up to and including witnessing the resurrection of Christ. This qualification is mentioned often (Mark 3:14; John 15:27 (For the term beginning compare Mark 1:1f, Luke 1:2.); Acts 10:39; Matt. 10:1; Luke 6:13; Acts 13:31; 1 John 1:1.) It is not peculiar to Peter or Acts 1. It is intimately related to the official function of the Apostolate stated in Acts 1:22 and Acts 10:39-41. The term, witness, always denotes in the New Testament an eye or ear witness and carries legal connotations. An apostle of the Twelve must have been a witness in this sense of Jesus Christ from John's baptism through the Resurrection.

It must, therefore, be clearly stated that the Apostle Paul did not possess the necessary qualifications to be one of the Twelve. Whether he had known Christ after the flesh or not, he certainly did not have the lengthy and intimate acquaintance demanded in verses 21 and 22. The language implies discipleship which, of course, during this time Paul did not possess.

2. The second qualification is underscored in verses 23 through 26. One

becomes an Apostle only through direct appointment by Jesus Christ. This qualification is emphatically declared throughout the New Testament (Acts 1:2; Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13; Acts 10:39-41). It is underscored in Acts 1. Two equally qualified men are set apart, but only one is chosen. The use of the lot emphasizes the idea of direct, divine appointment. Notice Prov. 16:33. The movement from Jehovah of Proverbs to the Lord Christ of Acts 1:24 points to the deity of Christ. The use of the lot is perfectly consistent with its scriptural interpretation and the necessities of the situation.

3. The third qualification is intimated in Acts 1:5 and 8. A supernatural grant of the Spirit was standard equipment for an Apostle. This meant the ability to confirm his mission by miraculous signs. Notice 2 Cor. 12:12; Matt. 10:1; John 14:12; Mark 3:15. This gift, however, is especially connected with their official witness to Christ (John 20:21 and John 14-16). The promises of the Spirit in John 14-16 are to be restricted to the Apostolate. John 14:26 is connected with the statement of v. 25 which has only Apostolic significance. The interpretation of John 14:25, 26 controls the promise of 14:16, 17. The connection of John 15:26 with verse 27 restricts its significance to the Apostolate. John 16:7-14 is, thus, also to be restricted to the Apostolate. Internal indications as well as the context mentioned before point to this. Note the mention of their world-mission in v. 8, the description of the Spirit's ministry as the continuation of Jesus' speaking to them in v. 12, the promise of being led into all truth in v. 13, and the promise of being shown things to come, v. 13. The witness of the Apostles will be, thus, not only a Spirit-taught witness, but the very witness of the Spirit himself to Christ. A witness, the very words of which are taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). This understanding of John 14-16 does not mean that a secondary application through the Apostles to the whole church is wrong.

4. This treatment of the original apostolate clearly points to the historically unique and unrepeatable character of the Apostolate. It places clearly before us the special position and power of the 12 Apostles. The New Testament mentions other Apostolates. These later apostolates add complexity to the picture. We must now come to discuss them.

B. The Pauline Apostolate

1. The Claims He Makes

Paul insistently claims an apostolate of the most exalted character for himself. He is in his own opinion on a par or more than on a par with the most eminent apostles (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11, 12; 1 Cor. 15:7-10; Gal. 2:6-10). Both in Ephesians and 1 Corinthians he reflects on the supremacy of the Apostolic office (Eph. 4:11, 2:20, 1 Cor. 12:28). Yet in these same letters he has classed himself as an Apostle (1 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1). Thus, we might be surprised to learn that this claim expressed in these terms was recognized by the original apostolate (Gal. 2:9, Acts 15:25, 2 Peter 3:15).

2. The Question He Raises

a. The Question of His Relation to the Original Apostolate

Paul was not one of the twelve. Nor was he strictly qualified to be. Nor did he claim to be. Yet Peter seems clearly to attach some sort of literal significance to the number, 12, in Acts 1. Under such circumstances how can Paul claim to be an apostle equal in stature to the 12? Several responses to this question are needed.

(1) We must remind ourselves that Paul's claim was recognized by the twelve (Gal. 2:9; Acts 15:25; 2 Peter 3:15). When we remember that the exalted terms in which he made this claim could not have been hidden from the original 12 Apostles, their acceptance of His Apostolate is very significant.

(2) Paul also possessed almost all the qualifications for the original apostolate. Of course, first one had to be a witness of the words and deeds of Jesus Christ from the baptism of John through the time of Christ's resurrection. It is to be noted, however, that even in Acts 1:21, 22 the stress is on being an eye-witness of the resurrection of Christ. This Paul, of course, possessed. Notice especially 1 Cor. 9:1-5. Second, direct appointment by Christ to the office was necessary. This Pauline qualification is emphasized in the accounts of his conversion in the book of Acts and many other places (Acts 22:15; 26:16; Gal. 1:1,15,16; 1 Tim. 1:1). Third, a supernatural grant of the Spirit was crucial to being an

Apostle. Paul regarded such a grant as vital to apostolicity, and he claimed it (2 Cor. 12:12 with 1 Cor. 2:4, 10, 13; 7:40). His commands and speaking were, therefore, the very words of Christ (1 Cor. 14:37; 2 Cor. 13:3-5). Thus, Paul lacked only a secondary aspect of one of the qualifications for the original apostolate.

(3) Paul claimed a special apostolate to the Gentiles. Notice Eph. 3:1-6. While the apostolate of the twelve certainly had a world-wide mission (Notice Acts 1:8.), it is clear that it also possessed a Jewish focus (Acts 13:31; Gal. 2:7-10). It may be for this reason that Peter insisted on replacing Judas with one who was a disciple from the days of John the Baptist. Also, the fact that Paul did not witness Christ from the beginning of the gospel, but only after His resurrection could be related to his position as the Apostle to the Gentiles. The pre-resurrection days of Jesus had a Jewish focus (Notice Matt. 15:24.), while Jesus' resurrection indicated the beginning of the world mission (Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8). It seems peculiarly fitting that the Apostle to the Gentiles had seen the risen Lord and was a witness of the resurrection, but was not a disciple during the days in which his mission was restricted to the Jewish nation.

b. The Question of the Cessation (or Termination) of the Apostolate

Some might think that they could use the apostolate of Paul to justify the idea of continuing--even 20th century apostolates. Some might even claim to be an eyewitness of the risen Christ. If Christ can appear to Paul, after His ascension, may he not appear to some one else in 1994? Several replies may be given to this question:

(1) An appearance in A.D. 34 puts Paul's eye-witness in an historical closeness to the time of Christ's resurrection. This is clearly different claiming such an appearance in the 20th century.

(2) Paul's eye-witness occurred during the apostolic period, i.e., the historical lifetimes of the original apostles, and was recognized by them. No possibility for such recognition of a new apostolate now exists.

(3) Paul regards Christ's appearance to him as his last appearance and

one that is clearly abnormal. What would he have thought of a 20th century appearance? Notice 1 Cor. 15:8. It is an interesting confirmation of this that Paul encourages the Corinthians to seek the best and highest spiritual gifts, but never thinks of the apostolate as a possibility or as something to which they should aspire. Notice 1 Cor. 14:1. The significance is clear. Prophecy is the highest gift available. The Apostolate is closed.

(4) The Apostles are the foundation of the church (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20). The analogy is one of a house with foundations upon which is built a building. Clearly, this restricts to the foundational period of the church. This excludes their existence after the period of the church's historical founding. Paul's apostolate occurred during this foundational period. Later claims do not.

C. The Other Apostolates

1. The word, apostle, was used to refer to some who were apostles in the same sense as Paul and the Twelve.

BAG, the Greek Lexicon, asserts that apostle may refer to a delegate, envoy, messenger, or, perhaps, a missionary. According to its root words, the word simply means, "a sent one." Obviously, such a word could have a broad range of applications. It seems quite possible that it could be used of those who were not apostles in the narrow, official, technical sense in which the twelve and Paul were. Cf. by way of illustration the broader and narrower meanings elder, overseer, and deacon. All have other meanings or applications than to the office which they specifically designate in the church. The biblical usage of apostle shows that it was not restricted to what we may call "Big A-apostles".

a. Sometimes the term is used to designate the apostles of the churches. That is, the official messengers, delegates, or envoys of certain, local churches (Phil. 2:25; 2 Cor. 8:23). This usage may explain some or all of the other uses of the term when it does not refer to "Big A-apostles." We might say that these apostles were apostles of the churches not apostles of Christ. That is, they were sent with the authority of the churches and not with the authority of Christ Himself.

b. Sometimes the term is used of missionaries. That is to say, those sent out from churches to be gospel pioneers in other places. Notice Acts 13:3; 14:26; 15:40, though only the idea and not the term is present in these passages. It is probably in this sense that men like the following are called apostles. Barnabas is called an apostle (Acts 14:4), but he is not a "Big A-apostle" (Acts 4:36f). Timothy is termed an apostle (1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6), but he is not a "Big A-apostle" (Acts 16:1f.). Silas also is called an apostle (1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6), but it is not likely that he was a "Big A-apostle," (Acts 15:32). Apollos may be called an apostle (1 Cor. 4:9; 3:22; 4:17), but he is certainly not an apostle in the strict sense (Acts 18:24f.). If Andronicus and Junias are designated apostles in Rom. 16:17 (This is uncertain.), it would be in this lower sense.

It is possible that such men were termed apostles because of their association with Paul in his apostolate to the Gentiles. This association gave to them, so to speak, a share in his ministry and authority. Notice especially 1 Thess. 1:1, 2:6. Certainly, Timothy and Titus were apostolic representatives. Thus, they were in possession of extraordinary authority (Titus 1:5, I Tim. 1:3; 5:17-20).

2. It is also possible that this term is used to designate others who were apostles in the sense of the Twelve and Paul "Big A-apostles.

The references to James, the Lord's brother, may assign a "Big A-apostolate" to him. Notice Gal. 1:19; 2:9; 1 Cor. 9:5; Acts 12:17; 15:6-13; 1 Cor. 15:7. (I am assuming that all these references are to the half-brother of our Lord. I believe this to be the most likely interpretation of these passages.) One may easily interpret such verses as ascribing to James an apostolate parallel to that of Paul. He had seen the resurrected Lord--perhaps like Paul he had been converted by the sight. Perhaps at that time he was appointed to a special apostolate to the Jews like that of Paul to the Gentiles. The reference in 1 Cor. 9:5 to "the brothers of the Lord" may mean that a similar apostolate was given to Joseph, Simon and Judas. Notice Matt. 12:46f; John 7:5; Mark 13:21; Matt. 12:46f; 13:55, and Acts 1:14.

D. Conclusions

1. This survey of the usage of the term enables us to make a distinction between a broader and narrower usage of the term in the New Testament. This distinction is clearly demanded by the necessary qualifications insisted in the cases Paul and the Twelve. It may be difficult always to decide in which sense an individual is designated an apostle. Notice the cases of Apollos, Barnabas, James, Jude, and Silas. Yet this difficulty ought not to cloud the basic clarity of this distinction. That there is a line between big A and small a apostles is clear. we simply do not have enough information to decide on which side of the line some `apostles' fall.

2. It cannot be denied that there is some flexibility with regard even to the Big A-apostles. The apostolate is not rigidly restricted to the Twelve alone. [\(38\)](#) The instances of Paul and James establish this. Also, interesting in this regard is the possibility that Paul's intimate associates obtained a kind of apostolicity from him.

3. We must, however, insist on the strict limits of the narrower Apostolate. The qualities of eye-witness; direct, divine appointment; and supernatural powers are absolute necessities to claim an apostolate like that of the Twelve and Paul. These unique qualities point us to the unique, un-repeatable, historically limited identity of the Apostolate. The idealized or symbolic references of the New Testament to the Apostolate (Matt. 16:17; 19:28; Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14) likewise suggest, the "closed character" or the "limited identity" of the Apostolate.

II. The Authority of the Apostolate

A. Its Nature

The evidence shows that the Apostles possessed for their words and actions the authority of Christ himself.

1. The Jewish Background

The Jewish background of the word, apostle, is very important to understanding its meaning. Ridderbos notes, "Recent research has shown that the formal structure of the apostolate is derived from the Jewish legal system in which a person may be given the legal power to represent

another. The one who has such power of attorney is called a Sjaliach (apostle). The uniqueness of this relationship is pregnantly [richly--SW] expressed by the notion that the Sjaliach (apostle) of a man, is as the man himself." (39)

2. The New Testament Presentation

This same idea that the apostle of a man is as the man himself is repeatedly manifested in the New Testament itself. Jesus Christ was his Father's Apostle. Thus what Jesus said His Father said (John 14:6-10). In a similar way, the Twelve are His Apostles. Notice John 20:21. To receive Christ's apostle is to receive him. Notice Matt. 10:40; John 13:20. Paul emphatically claims to having his commands be thought as equal with the Lord's. Notice 1 Cor. 14:37. Several comments on this last passage are important and related.

(1) Verse 37 strikingly underscores the idea of the apostle being as the man himself, because Paul has just completed a whole series of commands never spoken by the Lord. Notice the preceding context, especially vv. 26-36.

(2) Verse 38 powerfully emphasizes the extent and significance of this claim. The translation of this verse by the NIV is weak. That of the NASV and RSV is better. The idea is clearly that refusal to recognize and submit to apostolic authority in the person of Paul exposes one's claims to be a prophet or spiritual as false. Note v. 37, "if anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual..." But more than this is implied. Such a false prophet cannot be a saved man. Grosheide rightly comments, "If anybody does not observe these ordinances then he will not be recognized, he belongs to the perishing (1:18). Not to be recognized is the opposite of "to be known by Him." (8:3, cf. 13:12). (40) Notice also Matt. 7:23.

Also meaningful of the reality and the extent of apostolic authority is the passage (1 John 1:1-3. The recurrent "we" of these verses is clearly a reference by John to the original apostolate. Note the reference to the eye, ear, hand witness of the "we". This insistence on the genuine-ness and authenticity of John and the other apostles proclamation of Christ is to be understood in light of the Gnostic counterfeit Christianity which

John is battling everywhere in this letter. As over against the counterfeit gospel of the Gnostics, John demands acceptance of the Apostolic gospel as the test or standard of true Christianity. Notice also 1 John 4:4-6.

B. Its Features

As the personal representatives of Christ himself and as supported by the supernatural grant of the Spirit to guide their speech (Notice John 15:26, 27.), the authority of the apostles had several features or parts.

1. They were the deliverers of the Christian Revelation.

They were the guardians of the deposit. [\(41\)](#) This deposit was the official and trustworthy record of the person, work, and words of Jesus Christ. Notice 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13, 14. Jude speaks of "the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints" (Jude 4). These words clearly convey the idea of uniquely important and completed historical occurrences which possess authority. The apostles are equipped to safeguard the purity and accuracy of this treasure because of their character as eye-witnesses to those occurrences and their special grant of the Spirit. The word used by Jude, "delivered," connotes the idea of passing on a tradition. It is the idea of being the communicators of a tradition which summarizes this feature or aspect of the apostle's authority. Several points by way of explanation of this Christian tradition are necessary.

The Christian tradition is formally parallel to the conception of the Jews of their tradition. The terminology used is the same. *is used of the Jewish tradition in Mark 7:13 and of the Christian tradition in 2 Peter 2:21 and Jude 3. is used of the Jewish traditions in Matt. 15:2-6 and Mark 7:3-13 and of the Christian tradition in 1 Cor. 11:2 and 2 Thess. 2:15, 3:6. is used of the Jewish tradition in Mark 7:4 and of the Christian tradition in 2 Thess. 3:6. Notice also Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8.*

It is the apostles who are the deliverers of this tradition. Notice Luke 1:2; Jude 3 cf. v. 17; 2 Peter 2:21 cf. 3:2; 1 Cor. 11:2, etc.

The tradition possesses a kind of authority. Its clear authority is self-evident from the nature of the Apostolate. Historical occurrences were

witnessed by men and witnessed to in oral and written words. These occurrences, these men, and these words are regarded as possessed of nothing less than divine authority in the New Testament. This objective authority of the New Testament Canon refutes the idea of the canon maintained by Neo-Orthodoxy. Speaking of Neo-orthodoxy, Ridderbos remarks, "Such a point of view simply reduces the content of the canon and the gospel to what the church and individual believer understands." (42) It is no longer, then, an Apostolic canon. We must remember that the witness of the Holy Spirit exists first of all, in the objective words of the Apostles (John 15:26, 27)--not in the hearts of believers.

The objective authority of the New Testament canon also shows the wrong-ness of any "spiritual criticism" of the canon. Erasmus, Zahn, and others appeal to John. 16:13; 1 John 2:27; 1 Thess. 5:20f., and 1 Cor. 14:29 to support the idea that the church should and may criticize the Apostles by means of the Spirit. Never, however, does the New Testament permit or teach the right-ness of any criticism of Apostolic teaching. There is a enormous distinction between Apostles and prophets. (43)

The vagueness and lack of precision which we associate with the idea of tradition is not present in regard to the Christian tradition in the New Testament. (44) In support of this Ridderbos mentions the following thoughts. First, the Christian idea of tradition "is strongly determined by the corresponding Jewish concept of tradition. According to (them) the authority of tradition is not derived from the very nature of the transmitted material and from the office of the teachers of the law. The content of this tradition was before everything else constituted by the holy God-given Torah and those learned in the law enjoyed their authority because they sat in Moses' seat (Mt. 23:2). (45) Second, the passing on of this tradition is a matter of apostolic authority and thus its accuracy is guaranteed. (46) Third, the tradition is a synonym for the doctrine, the gospel and the Word of God. Thus, it possesses authority. (47) Finally, behind the tradition guaranteeing its genuine-ness is the risen Lord.

This overview of tradition is important precisely because the New Testament writings are "the remains and fixation" of this tradition. The character of the tradition and especially the written tradition is the

character of the New Testament.

2 They were the completers of the Christian Revelation

The authority of the apostles must not be rigidly limited to an exact copying of the words and works of God in Christ. Of course, this tradition governed their authority and could not be contradicted by them, but it did not exhaust their authority. By means of their extraordinary grant with the Spirit, they were also the means of new revelation. They were not only official and accredited eye-witnesses of Christ, but also the personal, Spirit-equipped instruments of new revelation from Christ. Notice 1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:15; Rev. 1:1.

3. They were the appliers of the Christian Revelation.

As the foundation or founders of the church, they were responsible to organize it--applying the Word in many ways and to many circumstances never directly spoken about by Christ. Notice 1 Cor. 14:37; 7:10, 12, 25; 11:23, 33, 34; Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess. 3:14.

While these aspects of apostolic authority are distinct, they are not always easy to separate or even able to be separated in the apostolic writings. They merge in the official authority of the Apostle in his whole ministry.

Dutoit makes the comment that "None of this means, of course, that the New Testament apostle was infallible." [\(48\)](#) I believe, however, that this is precisely what it means. If it does not mean this, we are at once confronted with the overwhelming problem of making a distinction between what aspects of the Apostle's words and what are not a standard for us. In their official ministries the Apostles were the standard not only in their teaching, but in their practices and examples. As we have seen, some raise Gal. 2:11 as an objection at this point. It may be questioned, however, if Peter's actions were official in Gal. 2:11. At any rate, they were directly rebuked by Paul himself and publicly renounced by Peter

C. Its Inscripturation

The New Testament itself witnesses to the writing down in a permanent

way of the Apostolic tradition. It teaches that is in this form that the church would in the future be bound to the word of the apostles. [\(49\)](#)

1. The written reporting of this tradition is associated with the idea of increased certainty with regard to its precise content. Notice Luke 1:1-4 and cf. also 1 Cor. 15:1-3. Because of the heretical errors of some at Corinth, Paul repeats in written form the gospel he preached to put the matter beyond doubt. He says in v. 2 that they will be saved by that gospel if they hold it fast in the very words which he proclaimed. This phrase is difficult, but almost certainly emphasizes Paul's concern that they retain his gospel in the precise words in which he preached it. It may be translated "by what word I preached it to you."

2. The permanent writing of the Apostolic witness is regarded as possessing authority from its start. It is to be read publicly in the church as the Old Testament was in the Synagogue. Notice Acts 13:15; 15:21; Luke 4:16f., I Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3. John's witness is a written one and in that form is true, John 21:24, and intended as the ground or basis of saving faith (John 20:30, 31). The phrase, "these things are written," parallels the technical terminology by which John repeatedly cites the Old Testament Scriptures. Notice John 2:17; 6:31, 45; 10:34; 12:14; 15:25. The written tradition must be held fast (2 Thess. 2:15).

3. The writings of the Apostles are made equal with those of the Old Testament canon. Given what we have seen about the authority of the apostles, this is not surprising. Notice 2 Peter 3:2, I Peter 1:12. Several passages make their writings equal to those of the Old Testament canon. Notice also Rev. 22:18 (where the curse is similar to those found in the Old Testament Scriptures); 2 Peter 3:15, 16; 1 Tim. 5:18 (where Luke 10:7 is cited as Scripture)

D. Its Implications

1. The idea of the New Testament Canon is consistent with redemptive history. The church in recognizing the canon has acted in accordance with an important feature of redemptive history: the commission of and giving of authority to the Apostles by Christ himself. [\(50\)](#)

2. The closed nature or completed limits of the New Testament Canon is taught by the New Testament. Says Ridderbos, "This is directly deducible from the unique and exclusive nature of the authority the apostles derived from Christ." [\(51\)](#)

3. The written character of the New Testament Canon is taught by the new Testament. The heretical threat of Gnosticism already mentioned made it necessary already in New Testament times to guard the deposit against perversion (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14). Already in the New Testament the meeting of this threat by means of the writing down of the authentic tradition can be seen. Notice 1 Cor. 15:1, 2; Luke 1:1-4; 2 Thess. 2:2 cf. 3:17; Gal. 6:11. All this means that the eventual acceptance of a written canon was necessary because of the danger of the distortion of the Christian tradition by heresy. This teaches the generally untrustworthy character of the oral tradition as human wickedness and weakness increasingly distorted it. [\(52\)](#) Maintaining that there is a canonical oral tradition possessing authority in the church is inconsistent with the very reason for a written canon.

4. The objective authority of the New Testament Canon is plainly taught by what we have seen. As mentioned above, the objective authority of the Apostles' words both spoken and written refutes the idea that the Canon is only a standard when it speaks to me. This idea, advocated by Neo-orthodoxy, is false and contradicts the plainest teaching of the New Testament about itself.

5. The apostolic authorship of the New Testament Canon is taught by what we have seen. Here the point is simply that the actual New Testament Canon received by the Church is consistent with what the New Testament teaches regarding the identity of the Apostolate. The New Testament Canon's authority is Apostolic in form. It was written by those who, if they were not Apostles themselves, came out of the Apostolic circle. Any who are not apostles may lay claim to the approval of the Apostles for their writings. Most of its books were written by Apostles. The others, Mark, (1 Peter 5:13), Luke, Hebrews (cf. ch. 13) were written by their intimate associates and with their implied authority. As we have seen, the New Testament does not rigidly limit the identity of the Apostolate. It speaks of prophets in association with the Apostles. Yet in

all of this a clear and defined authority is assigned to the Apostles of Christ. It is their authority given them by Jesus Christ that endorses the New Testament. Whether its books were actually written by Apostles, or by prophets working under their authority and with their approval, the New Testament is apostolic in its contents.

1. R. Laird Harris is an example in his *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, pp. 219ff.

2. For the bulk of the material of this section, I acknowledge my debt to Meredith O. Kline's book, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*. Part 1 of this book is extremely suggestive with reference to the subject of the canon. Part 2 cannot be commended because of the ethical theories set forth in chapter 3 of Part 2 are completely misguided.

3. Kline, loc. cit., p.27.

4. Kline, loc. cit., pp.27f.

5. Kline, loc. cit., pp.35ff.

6. Kline, loc. cit., pp.29f.

7. Kline, loc. cit., pp.36ff.

8. Kline, loc. cit., p.34.

9. Kline, loc. cit., pp.21f. Cf. E. J. Young in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. by Carl F. H. Henry, pp.157f.

10. Kline, loc. cit., pp. 43, 38.

11. Kline, loc. cit., p.74f.

12. Kline, loc. cit., p.75.

13. Kline, loc. cit., p.45, 46.

14. Kline, loc. cit., p.108.

15. R. Laird Harris, *The Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1957), p.167.

16. R. Laird Harris, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1, p.711.

17. R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and ...*, p.159.

18. E. J. Young, *My Servants The Prophets*, pp.29ff.

19. CF. Young's comments in *My Servants ...*, p.30.

20. Harris, *Inspiration ...*, p.160.

21. It is interesting to see E.J. Young admitting this in his article in *Revelation and the Bible*, p.168. What makes this admission so interesting is that Young differs from R. Laird Harris on this issue. He denies that the means of God's speaking to Israel canonically was only Moses and Prophets. Yet he is forced to admit that he does not know what the form was.

22. R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration ...*, p.169

23. Harris, *Inspiration ...*, pp.171,172.

24. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity*, p.171.

25. Harris, loc. cit., p.174.

26. Harris, loc. cit., p.174.

27. E. J. Young, *Revelation and the Bible*, pp.165, 166.

28. Young, in *Revelation and the Bible*, p.166, says: "What may be said about the books which belong to the third division? It goes without saying that these writers were acknowledged to be inspired men. But were they prophets? Surely it would be difficult to show that David and Solomon occupied the status of a prophet."

29. R.L. Harris, *Inspiration ...*, p.170)
30. Harris, loc. cit., p.170.
31. Harris, *Inspiration ...*, p.178.
32. Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988).
33. *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. by Carl F. H. Henry, (Baker Book House, 1958), "The Canon of the New Testament" by Herman Ridderbos, pp. 189-201.
34. Dutoit, *A Guide to the New Testament*, p. 92. Dutoit also remarks in that place, "He is normative subjectively and objectively."
35. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History ...*, p.13.
36. The apostolate is a reference to the Apostles of Christ in their combined identity. Together the Apostles of Christ form the apostolate.
37. These are the words of Don Garlington. Cf. also Ridderbos, *Redemptive History ...* p.16f.
38. The "certain fluidity" which Ridderbos mentions with respect to the narrower apostolate is a fact. Dutoit also mentions a "certain elasticity" in this regard in his *Guide to the New Testament*, p.104.
39. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History ...*, p. 15.
40. Grosheide, en. loc., pp.344ff.
41. The often used Latin phrase for this was the "custodi depositum".
42. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History ...*, p.31f.
43. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p. 29f.
44. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p.18.

45. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p.18f.
46. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p.19f.
47. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p.20.
48. Dutoit, loc. cit., p.107.
49. Ridderbos, loc. cit., pp.22f.
50. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p.27.
51. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p.27f.
52. Ridderbos, loc. cit., p.28f.

PART FIVE: THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE CANON

GENERAL INTRODUCTION: THE APPROACH TO THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Our study thus far (and the conclusions reached in it) is foundational for our approach to this examination of the historical evidence regarding the acceptance of the Canon by the people of God. It is important at the beginning of this study of the historical evidence to remind ourselves of what these conclusions mean for the presupposition, the goal, and the expectations of this study of the acceptance of the Canon.

I. The Presupposition of This Study

As to the presupposition of these studies in church history, I shall presuppose in these lectures on the acceptance of the canon the same perspective which should be presupposed in dealing with every other development in the history of the church. I will take as my standpoint or presupposition faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, I assume

that God has spoken His final word of revelation to our race in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Theologically, this means that I will approach this subject from what may be called a Reformed and presuppositional viewpoint. Rather than attempting to hide, disguise, or minimize the effect of this presupposition, I frankly admit it. I do this because I am convinced that any other approach is simply wrong-headed. Any other approach will distort the historical data and sabotage faith in Christ. This is the case because any other approach must and will approach the subject with some other presupposition than faith in Christ. Thus, the only alternative to a believing approach to this subject is an unbelieving approach. Thus, the only alternative to the right presupposition is the wrong presupposition or an attempt to combine the the right and the wrong presupposition.

Too often treatments of the subject of the history of the canon have failed to appreciate that this study unavoidably and pointedly confronts the student with the subject of epistemology. In my opinion even such fair and fine treatments of the subject as that of F. F. Bruce and B. F. Westcott fail at this point. [\(1\)](#) The canon is, first of all, the supreme rule or standard of faith. The very idea of a supreme rule or final standard necessarily raises epistemological questions. The study of the canon cannot, therefore, be merely historical. It must also be epistemological, apologetical, and theological. Because they do not emphasize this aspect of the study, but rather appear to treat the subject as mainly or finally a matter of historical investigation, the treatments of Bruce and Westcott are ultimately unsatisfactory to the believing heart. A believing heart knows that faith in Christ is well-grounded and desires to see how this is so.

The presupposition of faith in Christ has several, crucial ideas logically connected with it which are crucial for the study of the subject of the canon. It involves the necessary idea that God having spoken in Christ would by a special providence secure the preservation of that redemptive revelation so that it might be the supreme standard or canon of the church. This is an implication of the work of Christ stated by Christ Himself when He declares in response to Peter's confession of the true identity of Jesus Christ, "you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My

church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it" (Matt. 16:18).

This presupposition also involves the idea that revelation is supremely authoritative. This is the foundational concept at stake in the Reformed doctrine of the self-authentication of Scripture. The 1689 Baptist Confession echoing the Westminster Confession of Faith states this doctrine in paragraphs 4 and 5 of its first chapter:

4 The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church,¹ but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God.²

5 We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church of God to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scriptures;¹ and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, and the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, and many other incomparable excellencies, and entire perfections thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God;² yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.³

Assuming that God has spoken in Jesus Christ, such a revelation cannot be and must not be made to be dependent on anything else for its final attestation. It must be as revelation self-attesting. It is the divine message, the actual content, the natural truthfulness of the books of the canon that is the true and final reason for their acceptance as canonical by the church. Historical genuine-ness, ecclesiastical testimony, general apostolicity, and recognized orthodoxy may all in some sense be marks or tests of canonicity, but all such marks are themselves dependent upon the self-attestation of Scripture.

II. The Goal of This Study

The goal of this study of the historical evidence may be stated first

negatively and then positively. Negatively, it may be said that the goal of this examination is not to infallibly demonstrate by the historical evidence the authority of the received canon. The external, historical evidence for the genuine-ness of the Canon is insufficient by itself to ground an infallible faith in the Canon. Positively, it may be said that the goal of this examination is the confirmation of our faith by showing that the historical evidence is consistent with our faith.

III. The Expectations of This Study

The expectations with which this examination of the historical evidence is approached must also be stated. Our previous study would lead us to expect, first of all, general agreement among the people of God on the extent of the Canon. Christ's promise mentioned above suggests this expectation. Secondly, we should expect to discover that the canonical books possessed original authority among God's people. The prophetic-apostolic form of the Canon means that the canonical books had immediate authority with God's people. We do not expect to find books once universally thought of as non-canonical coming to possess canonical authority through a long historical process. We do not expect to find the church canonizing books in the sense of making them canonical by its own authority. Thirdly, we must expect to find some remaining, minor disagreement on the extent of the Canon. The self-authenticating authority of the Scripture and the promise of Christ sealed to the heart of the believer by the testimony of the Holy Spirit assures us that there will be general agreement on the Canon by Christ's true people. Nevertheless it must be remembered that in this life the people of God are yet imperfect both individually and corporately. Their faith, therefore, will be imperfect. Their remaining sin may obscure to them the testimony of the Spirit temporarily and partially. On a matter so basic and central as that of the Canon we would not expect the resultant disagreement to be great, yet some differences of opinion are to be expected. We would expect that major differences on the subject of the canon would be accompanied by other major departures from Christian truth. Having stated these expectations, we may anticipate the following examination by the assertion that the evidence abundantly confirms just these, precise expectations.

SECTION ONE: THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

I. The Acceptance of the Old Testament Canon

A. The Critical Construction

Harris helpfully summarizes the historical critical view of the Old Testament canon.

For many years critical scholars have built upon the threefold division of the present Hebrew Bible and have held that it represents a three stage development. The claim in brief is that there were three stages of canonization of the Old Testament. First the Pentateuch was canonized about 400 B.C. This date is based upon traditional higher critical theory The Prophets, however, were not canonized until about 200 B.C. By the "Prophets" all these authors understand the eight books call "Prophets" in the present Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and Jerome, namely the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets. These books apparently were not written in this final form in time to get into the canon of the Pentateuch That the "Prophets" were canonized by 200 B.C. is clear because of two special landmarks [signs--SW]. In Ecclesiasticus (written about 190-180 B.C.), there is a reference to the twelve minor prophets already collected as a unit. If this collection were complete, surely the rest of the books had also been completed. Secondly this canon of the "Prophets" did not include Daniel. It is, of course, a cardinal point of criticism that Daniel was written at about 168 B.C. as a tract to bolster morale [strengthen patriotic feeling--SW] in the Maccabean struggles. The claim is that if Daniel was written before 200 B.C. it would surely have been among the prophets. If the canon of Prophets had been completed after 168 B.C. it would surely have included Daniel. The only way to explain Daniel's absence from the Prophets is to place the close of the prophetic canon about 200 B.C. before the writing of Daniel The third stage of canonization according to critical thought is the closing of the canon of the Writings at the Synod of Jamnia in A.D. 90. Eissfeldt refers to the "synod held in about A.D. 100 in Jamnia (Jabne), some twelve miles south of Jaffa now what had come into being as a result of gradual growth was formally declared

binding and for this purpose was also undergirded with dogmatic theory" ...[\(2\)](#)

B. The Historical Evidence

Our present purpose is not to engage in a detailed answer of the critical construction. The writers cited above along with E.J. Young [\(3\)](#) have prosecuted this task efficiently. We will merely sketch the evidence for the following statement: All the historical evidence outside of the Old Testament back to the earliest information available points to a completed Old Testament Canon. All the evidence is, therefore, consistent with the expectation that the Old Testament Canon was closed at the time when its latest books were written. This time was, according to the witness of Scripture, approximately 400 B.C. The evidence supporting this assertion will be organized under the following five headings:

1. The Evidence from Inter-testamental Judaism

The division of the Old Testament into three divisions may tend to conceal its prophetic authorship and form in some minds. Yet, it is true to say that the early threefold division presupposes a recognized, completed Old Testament Canon. According to Young, such a threefold division of the Old Testament with its implication of a completed Old Testament Canon is "attested as early as the Prologue [Introduction--SW] of Ecclesiasticus. Since the writer of the Prologue states that his grandfather (the author of Ecclesiasticus, Jesus ben Sirach, around 190 B.C.) gave himself largely to the reading of "the law and the prophets and the other books of the fathers," we may assume that this threefold division was as old as the beginning of the second century B.C." [\(4\)](#)

The Dead Sea Scrolls support the evidence of Ecclesiasticus for a completed canon of the Old Testament in the second century B.C. Harris says:

This entire imposing structure [impressive building--SW] of the development of the Old Testament canon, supported by the most highly esteemed critical scholars, must now be seen to fall under the weight of

evidence, some new and some old. The most impressive new evidence comes from the Qumran find. In the second century B.C. there was evidently no difference in reverence accorded to books of the various divisions of the canon. Deuteronomy was loved and copied and regarded as authoritative [having authority--SW], as were Isaiah, the Psalms, and Proverbs. According to the theory, the Psalms, if highly esteemed in 200 B.C., should have been found in the canon of the Prophets. Although, so far, copies of the Psalms are not claimed to date from 200 B.C., yet a portion of Ecclesiastes (one of the lesser books in the third division of the Writings) is declared to date from 150 B.C. Indeed, its publisher concludes that the discovery of the copy argues that the book must have originated some time sooner - perhaps, he says, in the mid-third century or the late fourth B.C. If Ecclesiastes was copied - and evidently copied because treasured - in the mid-second century, the canonization of the Writings must have come close upon the heels of the canonization of the Prophets. Indeed, they must have been almost synchronous [at the same time--SW] if the Prophets were not canonized until 200 B.C. (5)

2. Evidence from First Century A.D. Judaism

Two witnesses may be cited here. The first, Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, died ca. A.D. 40. The second, Josephus, died ca. A.D. 100. Their evidence comes, thus, from the same time as the New Testament.

As to Philo, Harris says:

The evidence from his writings as to the extent of the canon comes from his quotations from the Old Testament and His comments upon various parts of it. Green refers to detailed studies by Eichorn which show that Philo refers to or uses as authoritative all the books of the Jewish canon except Esther, Ezekiel, Daniel, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. Again, these few books are not denied but simply neglected, for lack of occasion to use them. (6)

This statement makes clear that Philo utilized each of the typical three divisions of the Old Testament Canon a great deal.

Josephus' witness is even more clear.

Josephus' catalog lists the five books of the law, then thirteen books of the Prophets, then four books containing hymns to God and counsels to men for the conduct of life. This gives the total of twenty-two, which is evidently reached by associating Ruth with Judges and Lamentation with Jeremiah. The four books in the third classification unquestionably include Psalms and Proverbs; and Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon are most naturally taken as the other two. [\(7\)](#)

The total of 22 Old Testament books is the typical Jewish numbering and is the same as our English count of 39. Josephus thus testifies to a completed Old Testament Canon in the first century which was the same as ours.

3. Later Evidence

Harris supplies us with the later lists of those who still at a very early time numbered the Old Testament books as 22 or 24. Since both of these numbers are simply the result of different ways of numbering the 39 books which make up our Protestant Old Testament, each of those listed supports a completed Old Testament Canon the same to our own. "Eusebius, of 400 A.D., says that there are 22 Hebrew books. Jerome says 24. Origin, of 250 B.C. says 22. Tertullian, of 22 A.D., says 24. Melito, of 170 A.D., enumerates 24.The Talmud figure is 24." [\(8\)](#)

4. New Testament Evidence

The most obvious feature of the New Testament evidence is that there is a complete absence of any discussion of canonical questions in the New Testament. Though the New Testament does not hesitate to level cutting condemnation at many parts of first century Judaism, there is not a hint of criticism of its received canon. On the contrary, in the many places where the Old Testament is cited as absolute authority by the New Testament the Jewish canon is assumed to be authentic without discussion. There is every reason to conclude that Jesus and His apostles were in perfect agreement with first century Judaism on the extent of the Canon. This means that they recognized the 39 books of our Old Testaments. When Paul said, "All Scripture is God-breathed," he meant every Scripture or all Scripture contained in those 39 books (Matt. 4:1-11;

2 Tim. 3:16).

All of this is confirmed by the fact that the New Testament uses most, if not all, of the Old Testament books. Roger Nicole says:

If we limit ourselves to the specific quotations and direct allusions which form the basis of our previous reckoning, we shall note that 278 different Old Testament verses are cited in the New Testament: 94 from the Pentateuch, 99 from the Prophets, and 85 from the Writings. Out of the 22 books in the Hebrew reckoning of the Canon only six (Judges-Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles) are not explicitly [clearly--SW] referred to. The more extensive [broad--SW] lists of Dittmar and Huehn show passages reminiscent [which remind us--SW] of all Old Testament books without exception." [\(9\)](#)

5. The Academy of Jamnia

The words of Eissfeldt, cited above as representative of the higher critical construction of the Canon, give the impression that an official synod was held at Jamnia which formally canonized at least the third division of the Old Testament Canon, the Writings. Such a picture of what happened at Jamnia is misleading, without support, and simply false at crucial points. Young's words help to clear away some of the mist from Jamnia.

It has sometimes been held that a Jewish Synod was held at Jamnia in Palestine and that this synod made pronouncements concerning the extent of the canon. After Titus and his armies had destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Rabbi Johana be Zakkai settled in Jamnia and carried on his literary activity there. Jamnia did become a center of biblical study and the canonicity of certain books was discussed...." [\(1\)](#)

There was an academy at Jamnia, but it is extremely doubtful that there was a synod or council held there. There were discussions about the canonicity of certain books. The question was not, however, as to whether they should be included in the Canon. Rather, the issue was whether books already in the Canon had a right to be there. Young proceeds,

... and, in particular, it would seem, whether these books should be

excluded from the canon. But that there was a Synod which discussed whether certain books were to be included in the Canon is very questionable. Professor H.H. Rowley has written very wisely concerning Jamnia: "It is indeed, doubtful, how far it is correct to speak of the Council of Jamnia. We know of discussions that took place amongst the Rabbis, but we know of no formal or binding decisions that were made, and it is probably that the discussions were informal...." [\(11\)](#)

The facts concerning Jamnia are an inadequate foundation for the mighty, theoretical superstructure or building erected on them by the higher critical scholars.

C. The Apocryphal Addition

1. The Source of its Addition

In old manuscripts of the LXX [\(12\)](#) some 14 or 15 books besides those in the Hebrew canon were occasionally included. One scholar says, "Since 1546 the Roman Catholic Church has considered certain of these books to be inspired and on a par with the Old Testament. These are, specifically, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, I and II Maccabees, and some supplements to Esther and Daniel." [\(13\)](#) The year, 1546, is, of course, the year of the Council of Trent. The decree of the Council of Trent reveals the doctrinal biases of the Roman Catholic Church and also a growing tradition of the Middle Ages rooted in certain statements of church councils dominated by Augustine of Hippo. Prior to Augustine these writings had been occasionally cited in a way similar to Scripture by some church fathers. As mentioned previously, they were also occasionally associated with the Hebrew canonical books in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

2. The Falsity of its Addition

The recognition of these books as canonical by Roman Catholicism was wrong.

This is shown by the following arguments.

(1) In previous studies it was shown that the form of the Old Testament Canon was that it was given through Moses and the Prophets. It is universally acknowledged that the Spirit of prophecy departed from Israel after Malachi. It is also universally acknowledged that the Apocryphal books were written no sooner than the second century B. C. Therefore, it is clear that the Apocryphal books cannot be canonical. Indeed, one of the best of these apocryphal works itself teaches the absence of the Spirit of prophecy at the time when it was written. Notice 1 Maccabees 4:46; 9:27; 14:41.

(2) We have also seen previously that canonical books would be received as canonical immediately. One reason for this was their prophetic or apostolic authorship. Another reason why this would be so is that God gave the books to serve rule-books for His people. Thus, He would insure that they were accepted by them when he gave them. There is no evidence that these books were recognized as canonical by the Jews at any time and no evidence that they were recognized as canonical by the church until about the time of Augustine. This was 500 years after their composition. Harris says, "The single voice of antiquity in favor of the Apocrypha is that of Augustine and the Councils of Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (397), which he dominated." [\(14\)](#) Neither the Zadokite fragments, nor Philo, nor Josephus, nor the New Testament ever cite the Apocrypha as Scripture. [\(15\)](#) On the contrary, as we have earlier seen, the Apocrypha are excluded in every early counting or listing of the Old Testament canon until Augustine. [\(16\)](#)

(3) The promise of Christ that He would build His church on the authentic, prophetic and apostolic witness to himself assures us of the idea that broad and general agreement would be typical of the church's recognition of canonical books. Great agreement exists among orthodox Christians with regard to both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. But general agreement simply does not exist regarding the Apocrypha. The history of the Apocrypha is the history of doubts, division and rejection. Neither the Jews, nor the early church till Augustine, nor the Greek church, nor the Protestant church received the Apocrypha as canonical. Even Augustine had his doubts later on. [\(17\)](#) The very council at which these books gained unquestionable canonical status

for the Roman Catholic Church was the Council of Trent. It was that council in which from a Protestant point of view the Roman Catholic Church became officially apostate. Thus, departure on the subject of the canon by Roman Catholicism was accompanied by the official proclamation of serious, doctrinal error.

(4) Earlier it has been shown that the self-authentication of Scripture is rooted in its innate divine perfections, its claims, its content, its attributes. The Apocrypha does not possess such perfections. Harris is able to assert, "They were written after prophecy had been withdrawn from Israel. Their authors are conscious of that fact and speak accordingly. They claim no divinity ..." (18) Thus, they do not claim to be the Word of God. Also they do not display as to their content divine perfections. One divine perfection which they do not display is truthfulness. Harris remarks:

The scenes of Tobit and Judith are laid in the days of the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities and thus lie within the time of the writing prophets. But as Green says, "The Books of Tobit and Judith abound in geographical, chronological, and historical mistakes, so as not only to vitiate the truth of the narratives which they contain, but to make it doubtful whether they even rest upon a basis of fact." It is said, for example, that in Tobit's youth the ten tribes revolted under Jeroboam (1:4,5), which was in about 925 B.C., but that he was alive after the captivity of the ten tribes, which took place in 725 B.C. Yet he died when he was 158 years old (14:11). Judith speaks of Nebuchadnezzar as reigning in Nineveh instead of Babylon (1:1) and contains many other internal problems. The books neither claim to be the work of prophets nor could they be defended as such. The description "false prophets" would better characterize their authors. (19)

(5) It may be hard to prove rationally and logically, but it the Apocrypha lack the testimony of the Holy Spirit. To any who would be inclined to doubt the value of this remark, it can only be replied, let the believer read the Apocrypha and compare it with Holy Scripture. Listen to the personal testimony and experience of one such believer:

The author was once asked by an earnest Christian woman why

Protestants do not receive the Apocrypha. He gave in outline the argument presented above--that the Jews did not receive it, that Christ and the apostles did not receive it, that the Early Church did not receive it, and that the Roman Catholics adopted it only in Reformation times in reaction of Protestantism and to bolster their shaky position with respect to certain dogmas. It was evident that the inquirer appreciated the argument, but was not in a position readily to receive our judge the evidence. Finally, he advised her to go home and read the Apocrypha for herself. He predicted that she would enjoy portions of it, but would be struck by its inconsistencies when compared with the canonical Scriptures and by its evident legendary and unnatural material. Months later she returned and declared that she was fully convinced--she had read it! More Christians should read the Apocrypha as interesting old history. To do so would settle many questions regarding canonicity. [\(20\)](#)

SECTION TWO: THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

Introduction:

This study of the acceptance of the New Testament canon forces us to grapple with important and practical issues at the foundation of our Christian faith.

A. The Serious Questions Raised

The basic facts with regard to the recognition of the canon are such as to raise thoughtful questions and even troubling doubts in the serious Christian's mind. The easiest way to sense the problem with which the Christian is here confronted is by citing the well-known historical fact that the first person to list all the 27 books of our New Testament as the only genuine New Testament canonical books was Athanasius in the year 367. F. F. Bruce says: "Athanasius is the first writer known to us who listed exactly the twenty-seven books which traditionally make up the New Testament in catholic and orthodox Christianity, without making any distinction in status among them." [\(21\)](#) The serious-minded Christian, if not shaken by such an assertion, is at least filled with questions. He is accustomed to regard the New Testament as the

unquestioned foundation of his faith. Yet now he hears that its very contents were subject to dispute for almost 300 years after its books were completely written. He probably wonders how to account for this surprising fact.

B. The Preliminary Responses Presented

There are five important facts which may assist the serious Christian in approaching this subject. These facts will help him answer any doubts with which he is tempted. The surprising fact just mentioned may be less shocking if he remembers the following things.

First, the well-known distinction between the homologoumena and the antilegomena must be understood. Seven of the New Testament books (the antilegomena) were seriously doubted by some in the early church. The four gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, 1 Peter and 1 John were, however, never seriously questioned in the early church. These books are known as the homologoumena. As soon as the post-apostolic church becomes visible in the early second century, it emerges treating these books as possessing authority.

Second, the Christian must take into account the difficulties of communication in the early church. It is not surprising that some books took a period of time to gain acceptance in sections of the early church which were a long ways from those to hwome they were first written. Westcott argues this point persuasively:

The common meeting-point of Christians was destroyed by the fall of Jerusalem, and from that time national Churches grew up around their separate centres, enjoying in a great measure the freedom of individual development, and exhibiting, often in exaggerated forms, peculiar tendencies of doctrine or ritual. As a natural consequence [result--SW], the circulation of some books of the New Testament for a while depended, more or less, on their supposed connexion with specific forms of Christianity; and the range of other books was limited either by their original destination [the place they were first written to--SW] or by nature of their contents. [\(22\)](#).

Third, it must be remembered that what is under discussion is the *universal* acceptance of the New Testament. There is evidence that all of the books of the New Testament were regarded as possessing authority in some sections of the church almost from the beginning.

Fourth, it must be remembered that early Christians surrounded by a living oral tradition created by the original, apostolic preachers of the gospel did not feel the necessity for a written canon that we now feel. The need for a written canon may seem obvious to us, but it did not seem obvious to them at first. We must remember also that many early Christians lived in the hope of Christ's imminent return. Thus, they did not see or sense the necessity of a New Testament canon immediately. Westcott well writes:

It cannot however be denied that the idea of the Inspiration of the New Testament, in the sense in which it is maintained now, was the growth of time. When St Paul spoke of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament as able to make wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus, he expressed what was the practical belief of the first century of the Christian Church. The Old Testament was for two or three generations a complete Bible both doctrinally and historically when interpreted in the light of the Gospel. Many of the most farsighted teachers, we may believe, prepared the way for the formation of a collection of Apostolic Writings co-ordinate with the writings of the Prophets, but the result to which they looked forward was achieved gradually, even as the Old testament was itself formed by slow degrees. Distance is a necessary condition if we are to estimate rightly any object of vast proportions. The history of any period will furnish illustrations of the truth; and the teaching of God through man appears to be always subject to the common laws of human life and thought. If it be true that a prophet is not received in his own country, it is equally true that he is not received in his own age. The sense of his power is vague even when it is deepest. Years must elapse before we can feel that the words of one who talked with men were indeed the words of God. [\(23\)](#)

The study of the recognition of the canon is in many respects a classic case study in the development of doctrine in the church. We shall notice first the church's original, basic, un-tested, and un-refined ideas in the

period of the Apostolic Fathers. Then we shall notice how twisted and heretical movements made clear these raw convictions. We will also notice that the orthodox response to these heresies a timely and, indeed, providential impulse for carefully defining and explaining the subject of the canon. Finally, we will notice how a solid, public, and universal harmony was reached by the orthodox church in the Fourth Century. Thus, we will deal with this subject in three points:

I. THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

II. THE EARLY HERESIES

III. THE LATER AGREEMENT

I. THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

A. The Apostolic Fathers and the Pattern of the Old Testament Canon

The Apostolic Fathers were Christian writers who lived and wrote just after the Apostles. They did not consciously intend to move even one step beyond the views of the Christ and His Apostles. We cannot, therefore, consider their views without reminding ourselves of canonical ideas that were already clear in the New Testament itself.

In the New Testament the Old Testament canon stands as a complete whole possessing authority. The completeness and detailed authority of the Old Testament permeates the New Testament witness as a whole. It is assumed in the major passages which witness to the view of the Old Testament assumed by Christ and His Apostles (Matt. 4:1-11; 5:17, 18; John 10:34-36; 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

It is, therefore, no surprise that the Apostolic Fathers in the earliest post-apostolic writings assume this same view of the Old Testament. They view the Old Testament as a completed whole. They assume that its boundaries are well-known. Furthermore, they assign to it the same detailed inspiration which is assigned to it in the writings of the New Testament. Kelly (though probably no friend of the idea that the Bible is completely and in detail inspired) is forced to admit:

From Judaism Christianity inherited the conception [idea--SW] of the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture. Whenever our Lord and His Apostles quoted the Old Testament, it is plain that they regarded it as the word of God. This comes to light repeatedly in the new Testament records. ... It goes without saying that the fathers envisaged [pictured--SW] the whole of the Bible as inspired. It was not a collection of disparate [dissimilar--SW] segments, some of divine origin and others of merely human fabrication [making--SW]. [\(24\)](#)

Not only is the Old Testament a book possessing divine authority for the Apostolic Fathers, it is a thoroughly Christian book. They view it as a Christian book previewing in great detail the person, life, and work of Christ. Kelly remarks:

The importance of the Old Testament as a doctrinal norm in the primitive Church cannot be exaggerated. ... the doctrinal authority ascribed to it was based on the apparently [seemingly--SW] unquestioning assumption that, correctly interpreted, it was a Christian book, and that the prophets in particular were really testifying to Christ and His glory. [\(25\)](#)

The importance of the recognized authority of the Old Testament as a whole, in other words as a canon, for the church cannot be over-estimated. Its influence on the acceptance of the New Testament canon was great. Both in the New Testament and in the Apostolic Fathers the idea of an Old Testament canon within a Christian framework naturally and certainly suggested that a New Testament canon should be set along side of it. The only thing that was necessary to the development of such a canon was a sufficient period of time to pass for the apostles to die and the living oral tradition they left to fade. The church would then find itself called to be faithful to the Lord in a period marked by the absence of the apostles and the delay in the return of the Lord. Thus, it would naturally find it necessary and natural to safeguard its purity by following the precedent of Old Testament Israel and accepting "the memoirs [written remains--SW] of the Apostles" (as Justin Martyr called them) as a kind of New Testament canon. Only one danger, but an important and real one, towered over the church. It was that the church might be so content in the fading glow of the oral, apostolic tradition that it might be unconscious of the increasing departures from its first purity which it

would certainly come to contain. The church might eventually awaken to its danger. The question was, Would it awaken in time historically to ascertain those documents that genuinely descended from and enshrined the apostolic preaching of Christ? This danger providence prevented by swiftly loosing on the church in the first and second century perverted and heretical forms of professing Christianity which soon awakened and aroused her to the necessity of making clear her understanding of the New Testament canon.

How the idea of the Old Testament canon within a Christian framework naturally and certainly gave birth to the idea of a New Testament canon may be illustrated first from the New Testament. 2 Cor. 3:14 speaks of "the reading of the old covenant" in a context in which the Old and New Covenants are repeatedly contrasted. Note the explicit mention of the New Covenant in verse 6 and the contrasts of vv. 6-11. The "reading of the old covenant" is, of course, a reference to the reading of the writings of the entire Old Testament as this was carried on every sabbath in the synagogue (Acts 13:15; 15:21). When the widespread habit of the New Testament to put Christ and His apostles on a plane of authority equal or even superior to that of Moses and the prophets is properly weighed, the certainty that their writings would come to be considered a new canon is plain. The following passages display this habit (Rom. 16:25f; Heb. 1:1, 2a; II Peter 1:16-21, I Cor. 15:3-11, II Peter 3:1, 2; John 2:22).

The Apostolic Fathers manifest, of course, this same tendency to make New Testament apostles equal or superior to the Old Testament prophets . Kelly illustrates this tendency in the Apostolic Fathers for us:

The generations stretching from the apostolic age to the middle of the second century have a special interest for our inquiry [study--SW]. This springs from the fact that, although the new Testament books were already in existence, there was a yet no officially sanctioned [approved--SW] New Testament canon. Whence then did the Church draw her teaching, and how did she assess its soundness? For an answer we naturally look to the writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers For all these Christianity seems to have implied a complex of belief and practice which in the final resort went back to Christ Himself. But if He was the supreme teacher, the immediately accessible [available--SW] authorities

both for the facts about His Person and for His message were (a) the prophets, who had foreseen every detail of His ministry, and (b) the apostles, who had worked with Him and whom He had commissioned. This two-fold appeal to the united witness of the Old Testament and the apostles was characteristic of the age; it is aptly [fittingly--SW] illustrated by Polycarp's summons to the Philippians to accept as their standard Christ Himself along with `the apostles who preached the gospel to us and the prophets who announced our Lord's coming in advance.' [\(26\)](#)

How naturally this suggests the coming of a New Testament canon of apostolic writings to match the Old Testament canon of prophetic writings is obvious and may be diagrammed as follows:

[OLD TESTAMENT CANON=] PROPHETS-->**CHRIST**<--APOSTLES
[?? CANON ??)

Only one further item needs to be added to complete our understanding of how forcefully the example of the Old Testament canon suggested the addition of a New Testament canon. In at least two passages in our New Testaments apostolic writings seem clearly to be described as actually Scripture. In 1 Tim. 5:18 Paul cites the exact words of a saying from Luke 10:7 which is not found in the Old Testament. He couples it with a saying derived from Deut. 25:4 under the caption, "For the Scripture says." In 2 Pet. 3:16 Peter mentions his beloved brother Paul and refers not only to the letter Paul had directed specifically to his readers, but to "all his letters". He then comments as follows: "In which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction." The reference to the rest of the Scriptures seems plainly to class the letters of Paul--here presented as a group of letters well-known to the church--as Scripture. Thus, not merely equal authority with Scripture, but the very name of Scripture is already assigned to the letters of the Apostle Paul and the gospel of Luke within the pages of the New Testament. With this suggestive thought in our minds, we may now come to the consideration of the anticipation of the New Testament canon in the Apostolic Fathers.

B. The Apostolic Fathers and the Anticipation of the New Testament Canon

1. The Clear Immaturity of Their Witness to the New Testament Canon

The clear immaturity of the witness given by the Apostolic Fathers to the New Testament Canon may be simply summarized. The Apostolic Fathers knew of no New Testament canon in the sense of a list of books which it officially accepted as canonical. Furthermore, no clear boundary was drawn between those New Testament books considered canonical and those not considered canonical. Its testimony to the New Testament canon is not technical or official; nor is it thorough or detailed.

a. The witness of the Apostolic Fathers to the New Testament is not technical or official.

Here I mean to say that they do not cite the writings of the New Testament by means of formula which would identify them as scriptural or possessing divine authority. There seems to be no clear reference in the Apostolic Fathers to the New Testament writings as "Scripture". [\(27\)](#) The Scripture is everywhere rather the Old Testament. Furthermore, while sayings from each of the four gospels are clearly quoted, there is never any clear reference to the written gospels as we know them. That Paul wrote a number of letters is specifically and frequently mentioned, [\(28\)](#) but there is no clear mention of either a written gospel or of a collection of four gospels. [\(29\)](#)

This state of affairs creates a special difficulty in the Apostolic Fathers. The New Testament writings are often not cited with any introductory formula suggesting that they have special authority. Thus, when other writings are used by them, there is no certain way to make a distinction between the use of non-canonical writings and the New Testament canonical writings. Occasionally the Apostolic Fathers use the books of the Apocrypha. Clement utilizes language from the Wisdom of Solomon and actually mentions Judith by way of holy example. [\(30\)](#) Of more relevance to our theme is Polycarp's frequent reference to 1 Clement. Richardson is on good ground when he states: "He makes much use of I Clement." [\(31\)](#) Our problem is that the references to Clement are often not distinct from his references to New Testament writings. Thus, though it is impossible to say certainly one way or another, the impression is given to some that Polycarp regarded 1 Clement as inspired or canonical.

Against this, of course, much could be maintained. For example, Polycarp refers to Ignatius' letters. It would be far-fetched to take this as evidence that he regarded those letters as having special authority. It also must be noted that in comparison with their references to canonical Scripture the use which the Apostolic Fathers make of apocryphal or non-canonical writings is very small.

Westcott notes the testimony of the Apostolic Fathers to the genuineness of the Apostolic writings. Yet at the same times he sees this characteristic of the Apostolic Fathers. He theorizes as follows on its reason:

The testimony to the Apostolic Fathers is not however confined to the recognition of the several types of Christianity which are preserved in the Canonical Scriptures: they confirm the genuineness and authority of the books themselves. That they do not appeal to the Apostolic writings more frequently [often--SW] and more distinctly springs from the very nature of their position. Those who had heard the living voice of Apostles were unlikely to appeal to their written words. We have an instinct which always makes us prefer any personal connexion to the more remote relationship of books. Thus Papias tells us that he sought to learn from every quarter [source--SW] the traditions of those who had conversed with the elders, thinking that he should not profit so much by the narratives of books as by the living and abiding voice of the Lord's disciples. And still Papias affirmed the exact accuracy of the Gospel of St. Mark, and quoted testimonies () from the Catholic Epistles of St Peter and St John. [\(32\)](#)

Westcott is right to think that there are good reasons why the testimony of the Apostolic Fathers to the New Testament writings would be neither technical, nor official. Other considerations explaining this potentially confusing character of their witness might be added. Now, however, we must notice a second thing which manifests the clear immaturity of their testimony to the New Testament canon.

2. Their witness was neither thorough nor detailed.

Here we mean to say that there is never an reference to the New Testament as a complete whole. But we also want to say that there is

within the Apostolic Fathers certain and clear references only to about 23 of the 27 New Testament books. (33) Of special interest in this calculation is the fact that there is clear use made of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Revelation of John, and to a lesser extent of James in these writings. (34) This is an important fact for the history of the acceptance of the New Testament canon because these three books are the three largest and most important of the seven books known as the Antilegomena.

These things must be said by way of qualification and caution with regard to the witness of the Apostolic Fathers. Yet there are key facts which must be brought forward to indicate the positive value of their witness. While their testimony to the New Testament canon is not technical or official, nor comprehensive or detailed, it is solid and widespread. This brings us to ..

B. The Specific Content of Their Witness to the New Testament Canon

Their specific and positive testimony comes from their widespread use of the writings of the New Testament. Westcott, speaking of this, remarks.

It is true that these incidental references are with one exception anonymous. The words of Scripture are inwrought [woven--SW] into the texture [the very material--SW] of the books, and not parcelled out into formal quotations. They are not arranged with argumentative effect, but used as natural expressions of Christian truths. Now this use of the Holy Scriptures shews at least that they were even then widely known, and therefore guarded by a host of witnesses; that their language was transferred into the common dialect [speech--SW]; that it was as familiar to those first Christians as to us who use it as unconsciously as they did in writing or in conversation. (35)

Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians, Ignatius' seven Epistles, the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas are all marked by their widespread use of New Testament writings. Most impressive of all is, however, Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians. Richardson remarks on this feature of his letter: "He is not versed, as he himself admitted, in the Scriptures, i. e., the Old Testament. But he had meditated much on Christian writings; his letter is a veritable mosaic [a collection of pieces formed together into a

piece of art--SW] of quotation and allusion [reference--SW] to them. Modern critics are fond of calling him "unoriginal." [\(36\)](#) Richardson elaborates on the mosaic of New Testament writings crammed into Polycarp's Epistle:

Polycarp was acquainted with the Synoptic Gospels and The Acts. But his citations of sayings of Jesus are often rather freely made. His conflation [putting together--SW] of quotations may be due, of course, to his citing them from memory. He is well versed [very familiar with--SW] in the Pauline Epistles, and his references include Hebrews and the Pastorals. His special favorite, however, is I Peter; and of the other catholic epistles he knows James and I and II John. [\(37\)](#)

We must not pass from this consideration of the widespread use of New Testament writings in the Apostolic Fathers without due consideration of its significance and implications. We must admit that there is no clear witness in them that the New Testament writings were viewed openly as canonical Scripture. We must also admit that there is no clear testimony to a collection of New Testament writings. Yet there is nonetheless plain witness to just the kind of treatment and respect that one would expect canonical Scripture to be given. The writings of the apostles and their immediate associates were treasured and respected. Deep attention was paid to them. Their very terminology has woven itself so deeply into the minds of these men that it flows out of their pens and mouths naturally and without citation in most cases. This is without doubt important and significant testimony to the dominance which these writings were slowly attaining in the earliest post-apostolic churches.

All of what we have said with regard to the solid and widespread testimony to the canon in the Apostolic Fathers is strengthened by the fact that in their writings the basic insight and formal principle at stake in the New Testament canon is clearly embraced.

C. The Fundamental Insight of Their Witness to the New Testament Canon

This basic insight is their constant exaltation of the apostles and their authority in comparison with themselves. There is, in other words, an

awareness of their enormous insignificance compared to the Apostles. This awareness permeates their writings. (38) Sample testimonies to this sense of the greater authority of Apostles as opposed to Apostolic Fathers may be drawn from the major writings. Clement, for instance, says this.

The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus, the Christ, was sent from God and the apostles from Christ. Thus Christ is from God and the apostles from Christ. ... They preached in country and city, and appointed their first converts, after testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of future believers. ... Now our apostles, thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, knew that there was going to be strife over the title of bishop. It was for this reason and because they had been given an accurate knowledge of the future, that they appointed the officers we have mentioned. ... Pick up the letter of the blessed apostle Paul. ... To be sure, under the Spirit's guidance, he wrote to you about himself and Cephas and Apollos, because even then you had formed cliques. (39)

From these statements it is clear that the apostles possessed a dignity to which Clement makes no claim. It is also clear that Clement ascribed supernatural gifts to the apostles to which he made no claim. They knew the future. They wrote under the Spirit's guidance. He did not.

Ignatius also clearly attests his own sense of inferiority to the Apostles:

May I ever share in these, so that I may be numbered with the Ephesian Christians who, by the might of Jesus Christ, have always been of one mind with the very apostles. ... Make a real effort, then, to stand firmly by the orders of the Lord and the apostles Correspondingly, everyone must show the deacons respect. They represent Jesus Christ, just as the bishop has the role of the Father, and the presbyters are like God's council and an apostolic band. ... Since, too, I am a convict, I have not thought it my place to give you orders like an apostle. ... I do not give you orders like Peter and Paul. They were apostles: I am a convict. ... Yet your prayers to God will make me perfect so that I may gain that fate which I have been mercifully allotted, by taking refuge in the "Gospel," as in Jesus' flesh, and in the "Apostles," as in the presbytery of the Church. And the "Prophets," let us love them too. ... Flee from schism as the source of

mischievous. You should all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father. Follow, too, the presbytery as you would the apostles. [\(40\)](#)

There are confusing things in certain of these statements of Ignatius. Yet, the fact that apostles occupy a place of authority and dignity in the church next only to the Lord Jesus Christ is clear. Furthermore, despite Ignatius' clear tendency to exalt the office of bishop, it is plain that apostles are exalted above even the single bishop as he was presented in the writings of Ignatius.

Polycarp also makes the qualitative superiority and distinction of the Apostles plain:

Certainly, neither I nor anyone like me can follow the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul who, when he was present among you face to face with the generation of his time, taught you accurately and firmly "the word of truth." Also when absent he wrote you letters that will enable you, if you study them carefully, to grow in the faith [\(41\)](#)

The Didache bears on its very face the exalted reverence with which the apostolate was viewed. Its first line reads: "The Lord's Teaching to the Heathen by the Twelve Apostles."

The testimony of Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, and the Didache show very clearly that the principle and power which led to the acceptance of the New Testament canon was understood by the Apostolic Fathers. The whole point and purpose of the New Testament canon was to bind the church unchangeably to the authentic, apostolic preaching of the gospel. The canonical character of the Apostles was plainly understood and recognized in the earliest writings which succeeded the New Testament. Westcott testifies to this reality:

The successors of the apostles did not, we admit, recognise [understand--SW] that the written histories of the Lord and the scattered epistles [letters--SW] of His first disciples would form a sure and sufficient source and test of doctrine when the current tradition had grown indistinct or corrupt. Conscious of a life in the Christian body, and realizing the power of its Head, in a way impossible now, they did not feel that the Apostles

were providentially charged to express once for all in their *writings* the essential form of Christianity, even as the Prophets had foreshadowed them. The position which they held did not command that comprehensive view of the nature and fortunes of the Christian church by which the idea is suggested and confirmed. But they had certainly an indistinct perception [knowledge--SW] that their work was essentially different from that of their predecessors [those who had gone before them--SW]. They declined to perpetuate [continue--SW] their title, though they may have retained their office. They attributed to them power and wisdom which they themselves made no claim. Without having any exact sense of the completeness of the Christian Scriptures, they still drew a line between them and their own writings. As if by some providential instinct, each one of those teachers who stood nearest to the writers of the New Testament contrasted his writings with theirs, and definitely place himself on a lower level. The fact is most significant; for it shews in what way the formation [putting together--SW] of the canon was an act of the intuition [instinct--SW] of the Church, derived [obtained--SW] from no reasoning, but realised [accomplished--SW] in the course of its natural growth as one of the first results of its self-consciousness. [\(42\)](#)

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, (Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, 1988); B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, sixth edition, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1889) reprinted 1980.

2. R. Laird Harris, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, pp.723ff. Cf. also Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity*, pp.138ff. and John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, p. 134 for descriptions and examinations of the critical construction of the recognition of the Old Testament canon.

3. *Revelation and the Bible*, pp. 157ff; *Infallible Word*, pp.73ff.

4. Young, *Revelation and the Bible*, pp.164ff.; Harris, *Inspiration ...*, p.145.

5. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity*, pp.139, 140.

6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*
8. Harris, *Inspiration ...*, pp.142, 143.
9. *Revelation and the Bible*, p.138.
10. *The Infallible Word*, p.73.
11. *ibid.* Cf. also Harris, *Inspiration*, p.155, Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, p.138f.
12. LXX is an abbreviation for the Septuagint. This was the Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use at the time of the writing of the New Testament.
13. G. D. Young in *Revelation and the Bible*, p.171.
14. Harris, *Inspiration ...*, p.190.
15. Harris, *loc. cit.*, pp.182-185.
16. (Harris, *loc. cit.*, pp.142, 143.
17. Harris, *loc. cit.*, p.190f; Charles, in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1, p.205.
18. Harris, *loc. cit.*, p.194f.
19. Harris, *loc. cit.*, p.181f.
20. R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity*, p.193f.
21. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, (Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, 1988), p. 209.
22. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980), pp. 4 and 5.

23. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980), pp. 55, 56.

24. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, pp. 60 and 61.

25. Kelly, loc. cit., p. 32.

26. Kelly, loc. cit., p. 31.

27. This statement requires the qualification that the Epistle of Barnabas may cite Matt. 22:14 with the introductory formula, 'as it is written'. Westcott in his *General Survey* considers this possibility (p. 51) and remarks, "this quotation from St Matthew, if indeed it is a quotation, is the earliest direct example of a use of a book of the New Testament as Holy Scripture."

28. Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians, 47:1; Ignatius' Epistle to the Ephesians 12:2; Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians 3:2.

29. This statement must be qualified in two ways. First, the Didache cites the Gospel of Matthew so frequently and pervasively that it is difficult to believe that its author did not have Matthew's Gospel in written form before him. Second, in Ignatius' Epistle to the Philadelphians (5:1) the following statement could very easily imply the existence of a written gospel or gospels known by Ignatius: "Yet your prayers to God will make me perfect so that I may gain that fate which have mercifully been allotted, by taking refuge in the "Gospel," as in Jesus' flesh, and in the "Apostles," as in the presbytery of the Church. And the "Prophets," let us love them too ..." (As translated by Cyril C. Richardson in *Early Christian Fathers*).

30. Note Clement 3:4; 7:5; and 55:4.

31. Cf. for example Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians at 7:2.

32. Westcott, *General Survey ...*, p. 47.

33. The books to which no or only uncertain reference is made are 2 Peter, Jude, 2 and 3 John. Note the comments of Westcott, *General*

Survey ..., p. 48. Westcott notes that there are no certain references to the Epistles to the Thessalonians, Colossians, Philemon and Titus. I disagree with him with regard to Titus on the basis of the allusion made to Titus 3:1 by Clement in 2:7 of his epistle to the Corinthians. Additionally, the use made of 1 and 2 Timothy is undoubted. This puts beyond doubt that the Pastoral Epistles were known and attributed to Paul and corroborates the idea that the Apostolic Fathers knew of Paul's Epistle to Titus. There is, furthermore, no serious doubt regarding the authenticity of the Thessalonians Epistles, Colossians, and Philemon especially when all Paul's other letters are utilized.

34. Clement makes pervasive use of Hebrews (17:1; 27:2; 36:1-6), while Papias and the author of the Shepherd of Hermas plainly knew of John's Apocalypse (Cf. Westcott, *General Survey ...*, pp. 77 and 201).

35. Westcott, loc. cit., p. 49.

36. C. C. Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press), p. 123.

37. Richardson, loc. cit., p. 125.

38. Cf. the ff. references Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians 42:1; 44:1; 47:1; Ignatius' Seven Epistles: Ephesians 11:2; 12:2; Magnesians 13:1; Trallians 3:2; 4:3; 7:1; Romans 4:3; Philadelphians 5:1; 9:1; Smyrnaeans 8:1; Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians 3:2; 9:1; Didache Introduction.

39. Clement's Letter to the Corinthians 42:1; 44:1; 47:1.

40. Ignatius Letters to the Ephesians 11:2; Magnesians 13:1; Trallians 3:2, 3; Romans 4:3; Philadelphians 5:1; Smyrnaeans 8:1.

41. Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians 3:2.

42. Westcott, loc. cit., pp. 56, 57.

II. The Early Heresies

Three early heresies assisted the church in putting together its official understanding and list of the canonical books. Repeatedly in church history God has over-ruled heresy for the purpose of making clear important doctrinal matters for his church. This is especially true with regard to the decisive doctrine of the canon. The church's native canonical instinct, its faith that God had revealed Himself with authority through certain specific men and their writings, attained doctrinal clarity in response to Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism. **Gnosticism** especially in its earlier forms tended to claim a direct revelation from Christ which bypassed or minimized the apostles. In response the church became aware of the importance of stressing the apostolic and written character of its authority. *The fact of the canon became clear through Gnosticism.* **Marcionism**, a later and modified form of Gnosticism, accepted parts of the New Testament, but rejected the Old Testament and any parts too clearly influenced by it. Marcionism made the church aware of the danger of diminishing the canon. *The need to maintain the full extent of the canon became clear through Marcionism.* **Montanism** claimed prophetic revelations in the late second century. In response the church thought about on the limits of the biblical canon. *The closing or limitation of the canon became clear through Montanism.*

Richardson is simply giving a statement which almost all church historians agree about when he remarks on this subject: "The dominant interest of the second century Church was the ordering of its life and teaching. To preserve the apostolic witness against Gnostic perversions and Montanist extravagances, the episcopate, the canon, and the creed were developed." [\(1\)](#) Our interest is in the way in which these heresies forced the church make clear and carefully state its canon. We begin with Gnosticism.

A. Gnosticism

1. Historical Origins

Gnosticism, it is now commonly granted, was a professedly Christian manifestation of an intellectual movement already flowing through the Hellenistic world when the Messiah was born. Richardson remarks:

Gnosticism is older than Christianity. It represents the fusion [combining--SW] of Oriental and Greek ideas into various elaborate [complicated--SW] systems whose aim is to acquire "gnosis" or knowledge of the divine. Ancient mythological material is blended with philosophic and religious ideas. Sometimes the dominating interest is the philosophic one--the problem of the one and the many. At other times the religious element is primary, and salvation is sought from the insecurity and evil of the natural world. Popular magical notions also enter in; and the vast movement of Gnosis had manifold forms throughout the Hellenistic world. Gnosis is knowledge based on revelation, but it is not intellectual knowledge. It is saving knowledge, enabling the soul to escape the flux and change of life and to find the assurance of immortality. By the true gnosis the soul is freed from the evil prison house of the body into which it has fallen, and empowered to ascend to its original home in the spiritual world. [\(2\)](#)

Though it preceded Christianity, it soon came into contact with and infected it. In Acts 8 the New Testament records the professed conversion, wicked ambition, and final rejection of Simon Magus. Harold O. J. Brown comments:

Gnostic motifs were already felt in Christian circles in the Age of the Apostles. Early church tradition attributes the rise of Gnosticism to Simon Magus, briefly mentioned in Acts 8:9-24. ... Later traditions tell us that he went to Rome, where he competed with the Apostle Peter and founded a gnostic sect. [\(3\)](#)

We also clearly meet the reply to Gnostic tendencies in the Epistles and perhaps also the Gospel of John. We will turn to those writings during the course of our discussion of Christian Gnosticism. Early tradition records a long list of Gnostic teachers who clothed themselves in the robes of Christianity. We know of Cerinthus who lived in Ephesus at the same time as the Apostle John. Also worthy of mention are Saturninus, Basilides, Valentinus, and, of course, Marcion.

2. Typical Features

Brown in summarizing the features of the system of Saturninus (also

known as Saturnilus) provides us with a helpful summary of the typical features of most Gnostic systems:

In the vision of reality developed by Saturnilus, three things stand out: (1) the notion of a descending chain of intermediate, more or less corruptible spiritual powers between the unknowable Father and the world; these are called "aeons" from a Greek word usually translated "ages," but here having the special meaning of godlike spiritual entity. The God of the Jews and his angels are degenerate, base [bad--SW] aeons, Christ a good one. (2) Superimposed [placed against the background--SW] on this chain is a dualism between the spiritual world and the material world; the spiritual entities [beings], the aeons, may be good or evil, but the material world is the product of evil aeons and is itself evil. (3) The specifically gnostic idea of salvation involves the liberation of the embodied human spirits from their prisons of flesh and their return to the Father. (4)

Clearly, we have here a system embodying the two Hellenistic idea of emanation by which the infinite god is mediated to the finite world and the idea of a spirit/flesh dualism in which the flesh is innately evil and the spirit viewed as innately good.

The way in which this idea was worked out in the Gnostic systems involved fantastic, mythic, and complex pantheons. Says Brown again: "According to Valentinus, Christ is the offspring of Sophia, the last of the thirty highest aeons who make up the pleroma, or fullness, of the aeons. He reveals the Father to those who have spiritual natures and leads them to salvation by a path of enlightenment." (5)

Such a system, of course, suffered the self-inflicted fate of attempting to reconcile the un-reconcilable. If spirit and flesh are really total and infinite opposites then no number of emanations from the infinite god can span the gulf between them. Brown comments:

Nevertheless, if one begins with the presupposition that the spiritual can have nothing to do with the material, it is difficult to see how increasing the number of intermediate beings really makes the leap from spirit to matter easier or more plausible. Irenaeus lampoons the system of Valentinus in a satire in which the utterly spiritual aeon, Only Begotten,

produces another spiritual aeon, Utternothingness, which in turn produces an aeon called Gourd--palpable [physical--SW], edible [eatable], and utterly [thoroughly--SW] delicious. Gourd in turn produces Cucumber, and these four then generate all the other "delirious [crazy--SW] melons of Valentinus." (6)

3. Distinguishing Marks

When such premises were made the starting-point of a re-interpretation of Christianity, it is not surprising that they wrought havoc [chaos--SW] and generated heresy. The Epistle of 1 John is now commonly understood to be directed against Gnosticism. This Cnosticism displayed itself as a kind of super-Christianity. John Stott comments:

This has led a majority of commentators to discover the heretics in the ranks of the gnostics whose preoccupation was with deliverance from the 'flesh', which they regarded as the soul's material imprisonment. 'Gnosticism is a broad term embracing various pagan, Jewish and semi-Christian systems. ... Plummer sums up its two main principles as 'the impurity of matter' and 'the supremacy of knowledge'. (7)

1 John reveals at least three deviant tendencies of the Christianized Gnosticism troubling the churches to which John was writing.

a. Christological Docetism

The most foundational and distinctive of the heresies which Gnosticism begat in its rape of Christianity was a docetic view of the person of Christ. Docetism derived from the Greek verb, , meaning to think or seem was the view which denied the real humanity and the material reality of the Christ. Specifically, these teachers taught that the heavenly Christ was not the earthly Jesus, but descended on him at baptism leaving Jesus before he died (1 John 2:22; 4:2, 3, 15, 5:1). It is this view which makes intelligible the somewhat mysterious language of 1 John 5:5-11 (cf. Mark 1:9-11). Docetism was, of course, the natural result of the spirit/flesh dichotomy of Gnostic thought. Wherever it later influenced Christianity it almost inevitably begat Docetism. Marcion, the classic example of Christianized Gnosticism almost a century later, also had a Docetic

Christology. Kelly remarks: "Marcion's Christology, too, was docetic at any rate as regards the Lord's body." [\(8\)](#)

b. Arrogant Elitism

An elitist as I am using it here is one who thinks that he is by inherent right one of the chosen few and despises those who are not. Gnosticism was elitist through and through. Brown remarks:

The gnostic movement has two salient [striking--SW] features that appeal to countless minds in every age, i. e. the claim to present a secret lore [knowledge--SW], explaining otherwise incomprehensible [impossible to understand--SW] mysteries, and the assertion that its secrets are accessible only to the elite--thus by implication defining as elite all who take an active interest in them. [\(9\)](#)

A detailed, threefold ranking of men and explanation of the origin of these divisions was often provided in Gnostic theory. Speaking of the Christianized Gnosticism of Valentinus Kelly remarks:

When he made man, he first made 'the earthy man', and then breathed his own psychic substance into him; but without his knowledge Achamoth planted *pneuma*, or spirit, born from herself, in the souls of certain men. This spiritual element yearns for God and salvation consists in its liberation from the lower elements with which it is united. This is the task which the Savior Jesus accomplishes. According to their constitution, there are three classes of men--the carnal or material, the psychic and the pneumatic. Those who are carnal cannot in any case be saved, while in order to attain redemption the pneumatic only need to apprehend the teaching of Jesus. The psychic class can be saved, though with difficulty, through the knowledge and imitation of Jesus. [\(10\)](#)

The spiritual class of men were sometimes identified by means of biblical terminology as elect. It is also probable that the distinction between the psychic and the pneumatic class of men was also used to distinguish between ordinary, un-enlightened Christians and the Gnostic super-Christians.

In 1 John this arrogant elitism appears to be visible at a number of places (1 John 2:19, 20 and cf. 2:9-11, 4:20, 21). The Gnostic elitism may provide a clue to the emphatic universalism of 1 John 2:2 where Christ is said to be "the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." Arminians have often urged this text against the Calvinistic view of election. It is better understood as addressed against a Gnostic and elitist perversion of election in which the elect as naturally and by creation different from the rest of men.

As we have suggested, this elitism is closely related to the claims of the Gnostics that they have been perfected through their secret knowledge. It may be such claims of special knowledge and perfection that John is piercingly confronting when he claims for all Christians perfection and knowledge (1 John 2:5, 20, 27).

c. Moral Indifferentism

The Gnostic idea that there is an absolute contrast between the spirit and the flesh could lead (as historians commonly note) to two widely and seemingly different moral results: asceticism (the view that sees moral value in denying the body legitimate pleasures and needs) or libertinism (the view that sees nothing wrong with indulging every desire of the body). Bruce remarks:

In its practical consequences for daily life, Gnosticism was usually associated with a strict asceticism. This tendency appears as early as the incipient Gnosticism attacked in the Epistle to the Colossians, where the tendency of this teaching is summarized in the words, "Touch not, taste not, handle not." There is some evidence, indeed, for a Gnosticism which drew directly opposite corollaries [conclusions--SW] from the doctrine of the inherent [innate--SW] worthlessness of matter; the body, it was argued, is material and therefore morally indifferent [without importance--SW], and its desires may be indulged at will without any harmful consequences [results--SW] to the true life of the spirit. But this outlook was not characteristic of the main Gnostic schools. [\(11\)](#)

At first glance it seems to be this latter tendency which characterized the Christianized Gnosticism attacked by John in his first epistle (1 John 2:3,

4; 3:7-9). It is perhaps possible that the despising of law by the Gnostics assumed in these passages reflects not so much libertinism as a sense of moral superiority which put them above and beyond the laws and rules which bound ordinary Christians (1 John 1:6-10). Bruce remarks, "On the practical level these new teachers claimed to have reached such an advanced stage in spiritual experience that they were 'beyond good and evil'. (12) Clearly, such a view was almost always a prophecy of moral disaster. Thus, we may rightly describe it as moral indifferentism.

We must now examine how these claims directly effected the subject of revelation and the canon.

4. Revelatory Claims

The name, Gnosticism, is derived from the claim of these sects to a special divine revelation or knowledge, a gnosis (). Brown comments on how this name indeed specifies a distinctive feature of Gnosticism.

The gnostic movement has two salient [striking--SW] features that appeal to countless minds in every age, i. e. the claim to present a secret lore [knowledge--SW], explaining otherwise incomprehensible [impossible to understand--SW] mysteries, and the assertion that its secrets are accessible only to the elite--thus by implication defining as elite all who take an active interest in them. (13)

Part of the subtlety and appeal of this claim to gnosis is that Christianity itself did in its own sense make a claim to possess a special knowledge of God not possessed by the un-spiritual (Matt. 13:11; 1 Cor. 2:6-16). It is this that explains the tendency of some more or less orthodox, Christian theologians like Clement and Origen of Alexandria to present Christianity as a gnosis for the spiritual and to describe mature and well-taught Christians as gnostics. (14) Because of this superficial and verbal similarity between Christianity and gnostic modes of thought. it is not surprising that gnostic teachers might easily pass themselves off as Christian and, perhaps, even think that they were.

The obstacle in the way of this gnostic reinterpretation of Christianity was the fundamental difference between the view of the universe held by

Gnosticism and that held by Christianity. Both could speak of a special revelation and a savior, but these superficial similarities were grounded in completely different views of the universe. The Gnostics presupposed a fundamental and ultimate distinction between the spirit and the flesh, resolved all ethical distinctions into it, and attempted to span the gap between the spirit and the flesh by a complex theory of personal emanations. Christianity in contrast saw the fundamental distinction as that between Creator and creature, taught that the material world was a good creation of God, and taught that sin was an ethical rather than ontological (related to being) matter. Thus, it was at the point of the assessment of the flesh as it came to expression in the vital Christian doctrines of the resurrection of the body and the person of Christ that clear and irreconcilable differences were evident between authentic and gnosticized Christianity. So important and strategic were these doctrines to Christianity that it was impossible to disguise the differences between Gnosticism and Christianity to even the most simple of minds. We find, therefore, even so non-theological a soul as Ignatius taking issue with Gnostic tendencies in his letters at just these points:

For it was for our sakes that he suffered all this, to save us. And he genuinely suffered, as even he genuinely raised himself. It is not as some unbelievers say, that his Passion was a sham. It's they who are a sham! Yes, and their fate will fit their fancies--they will be ghosts and apparitions.

For myself, I am convinced and believe that even after the resurrection he was in the flesh. Indeed, when he came to Peter and his friends he said to them, "Take hold of me, touch me and see that I am not a bodiless ghost." And they at once touched him and were convinced, clutching his body and his very breath. For this reason they despised death itself, and proved its victors. Moreover, after the resurrection he ate and drank with them as a real human being, although in spirit he was united with the Father. [\(15\)](#)

Because of this emphasis on the reality of Christ's flesh Ignatius emphasizes the necessity of being committed to Christ "in body and soul" [\(16\)](#) and also stresses that the Lord's Supper "is [represents?--SW] the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ" [\(17\)](#).

The obvious contrast between Apostolic Christianity and gnosticized Christianity forced the earliest Gnostic heretics to claim a revelation from Christ which bypassed, overruled, or generally overshadowed the gospel preached by the Apostles. Hence it is in 1 John that the Apostle lays such emphatic stress on the eyewitness authority of his preaching (1 John 1:1-3). The use of the first person, plural pronoun in this opening statement of 1 John is a clear reference in this context to the joint eyewitness of the appointed apostles of Christ. According to Acts 1:22 one technical name for the apostles was a "witness". This gives a pointed emphasis to the statement of 1 John 4:4-6 (cf. also 4:13, 14) in which John explicitly contrasts "you", "they", and "we". "You are from God" he says to the true Christians. "They are from the world" he says of the gnostic false teachers. "We are from God" he asserts of the Apostles and goes on to make this startling and emphatic claim, "he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." Here John declares that the standard by which true Christianity and false Christianity is to be discerned is the standard of the Apostolic proclamation of the gospel. There is no other, further, or secret gospel which bypasses the public proclamation of the Apostles of Christ. This is the point of the emphasis in 1 John 2 on the fact that they all know (1 John 2:20, 27).

After the Apostles died, it was no longer necessary to claim a revelation which bypassed them. Several other alternatives could be utilized by the Gnostics to give their teaching an appearance of authority. At this point it was only necessary to pen counterfeit gospels and letters which were ascribed to apostles; or they could also by means of a way of interpreting which used allegory draw their theories from the genuinely apostolic documents. [\(18\)](#) Finally, they could claim that the apostles themselves reserved a secret gnosis for those Christians worthy of it. Says Kelly of Tertullian who was refuting the Gnostics of this later period, "He was emphatic that no secret tradition existed, and that it was incredible that the apostles did not know or failed to pass on, the revelation in its entirety." [\(19\)](#)

The claims of Gnosticism to a secret revelation, thus, very early forced the church to self-consciously reflect on its sources and authorities. The

response of the church to Gnosticism emphasized two important features of its canon or standard of faith and life. It was an apostolic standard. It was a public--not a secret--standard. The public nature of this standard caused the church to emphasize the Apostolic office, that is to say, the presumed orthodoxy of churches founded by Apostles and led in direct succession by men descended from the elders first appointed by the apostles. It also led the church to emphasize the Apostles' Creed, that is to say a written summary of the Apostolic faith based upon the baptismal vows taken by every Christian. Finally, and most importantly it led the church to emphasize, collect, and discriminate the genuinely Apostolic writings from writings falsely claiming apostolic authorship and especially heretical writings.

B. Marcionism

1. The Description of Marcion

What we know for certain of the heretic, Marcion is well summarized by the article in *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia*:

The facts of the early career of Marcion are difficult to establish partly because of the tendency of ecclesiastical writers, from whom information of him is gained, to believe and report damaging stories concerning heretics. The principal sources for his life are the writings of Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, Epiphanius, and Tertullian, and these writers are not in entire accord. His birthplace is given as Sinope, in Paphlagonia, on the Euxine, and he is described as a shipmaster of Pontus. Tertullian tells of his coming from Pontus (c. 140) and joining the Christian community at Rome, in the first warmth of his faith making them a present of 200,000 sesterii He speaks of his differences with the Roman community, of his excommunication, of the return of his gift, and of his attaching himself afterward to the Gnostic teacher Cerdo According to the same authority the Marcionites dated the time of their master's separation from the Church the autumn of 144. Justin in his first apology written about 150 ... notices the great activity of Marcion. Irenaeus ... speaks of Marcion's flourishing [being active and having great influence--SW] under the episcopate of Anicetus (154-165) and tells how Polycarp met Marcion and addressed him as the first-born of Satan

These give the few certain facts in regard to Marcion's life, his separation from the church in 144, his study of Gnosticism, and his foundation of a separate Christian community. [\(20\)](#)

The author of this article omits some facts he considers doubtful. It is rumored in early traditions that he was the son of the Bishop of Sinope and thus raised in a Christian home. It is supposed that by means of this upbringing he became especially enamored of the writings of Paul. It is also said that his own father excommunicated him for 'corrupting a virgin'. For reasons already given in the above quoted article particularly this last piece of information may need to be treated with suspicion.

2. The Relation to Gnosticism

It is plain from the information already given that Marcion was highly influenced by Gnosticism, particularly the Gnostic teacher, Cerdo. With Gnosticism he distinguished between the Old Testament god and the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. He also taught docetism, the view that Christ only seemed to be a true man, at least in a modified form--denying that the Christ was born of Mary and teaching rather that he descended from heaven. His 'purified' gospel begins with the words: "In the fifteenth year of the Emperor Tiberius God came down to Capernaum and taught on the sabbath days". [\(21\)](#)

Marcion also inculcated asceticism. The members of his rival church were expected to be celibate, abstaining from sex and marriage, and engage in other ascetic practices. Thus, we may undoubtedly class Marcionism as a form of Gnosticism.

Nevertheless, it is proper to see several distinctions which show that Marcionism was distinct from Gnosticism. Primary among these distinctions must be noted a real though perverted interest in the doctrine of grace. Marcion's major original work the *Antitheses*. According to the article cited above, this "was a semi-dogmatic treatise [a doctrinal book claiming some authority--SW] contrasting contradictory sentences from the law and the Gospel." [\(22\)](#) The same writer goes on to remark:

For him Paul alone was the true apostle; yet he disregarded the Jewish elements in Paulinism. The favorite Pauline antitheses between the law and the Gospel, anger and grace, works and faith, flesh and spirit, sin and righteousness, death and life, were congenial [harmonious--SW] to his thought and germane [appropriate--SW] to his method. In Marcion's system the Gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ is given so much weight that it caused him to view the Church conception of the Gospel as an unpermissible falsification [unlawful forgery--SW]. [\(23\)](#)

Another feature which emphasizes the supremacy of this interest in law and grace of Marcion and makes him different from other Gnostics is his failure to develop the complex pantheon of emanations (the complicated understanding of all the different gods coming from the first god) presented by other Gnostic teachers of his own era like Valentinus and Basilides. Says the same author just quoted:

Marcion's teaching is particularly remarkable for its lack of interest in metaphysical questions [theoretical questions about God and being]. It is certain, however, that he did not regard the Cosmos [world--SW] as the creation of the supreme God; it was the production of a demiurge [a lesser god--SW] Marcion differs entirely from Valentinus in failing to discuss eons. Marcion's thought concerns itself entirely with the religious records of the Jews and the Christians. [\(24\)](#)

Marcionism differed from Gnosticism, then, in being less fantastic, more restrained and practical, and more interested in questions of a genuinely Christian character.

3. The Contribution to Canon

The relevance of Marcion to the subject of the New Testament canon is indisputable. In the words of F. F. Bruce, "Marcion is the first person know to us who published a fixed collection of what we should call New Testament books. Others may have done so before him; if so, we have no knowledge of them." [\(25\)](#)

Marcion's canon was, however, significantly different than the canon we know today. Says Kelly:

His dualism [the view that there are two equal and opposite gods, one good and one evil--SW], however, led him to reject the Old Testament, and it was natural that he should seek to canonize an alternative set of Scriptures for use in his church. St. Paul, so outspokenly hostile to the Law, was his hero, and he regarded such Christian writings as seemed infected [poisoned] with a Jewish outlook as suspect [questionable--SW]. Hence the list he drafted consisted of St. Luke's Gospel, with all seemingly Judaizing passages excised, and ten Pauline epistles (all, in fact, except the Pastorals) similarly expurgated [cleansed--SW]. [\(26\)](#)

Because of the facts given above, Marcion has sometimes been exalted into the position of the creator of the idea of the New Testament canon. [\(27\)](#) The facts seem more consistent with the idea that, far from being a creator, he was a mutilator of the Christian canon. Kelly perceptively remarks:

The significance of Marcion's action should not be misunderstood. He has sometimes been acclaimed (e. g. by the great German scholar Harnack) as the originator [beginner--SW] of the Catholic canon, but this is an extravagant [excessive--SW] point of view. The Church already had its roughly defined collection, or (to be more precise) collections, of Christian books which, as we have seen, it was beginning to treat as Scripture. [\(28\)](#)

With this limiting of the importance of Marcion in mind, we may yet allow that Marcion's heresy was of great significance to the church and its acceptance of the canon by the reaction it created. Kelly further remarks:

Nevertheless, if the idea of a specifically Christian canon was deeply rooted in the Church's own convictions and practice, Marcion played an important part in the practical emergence [coming out--SW] of one. What none of the great ecclesiastical centres, so far as we know, had done, and what his initiative [ambition--SW] seems to have provoked them to do, was to delimit [set the limits of--SW] their lists of authorized Christian books in a public, official way. [\(29\)](#)

At more length Orr shrewdly summarizes the significance of the Marcionite heresy for the acceptance of the New Testament canon.

The first important gain to the Church from the controversy in which it had been plunged, was the collection of a body of *New Testament Scriptures*, or the formation [putting together--SW] of a New Testament canon. It is not that the Church did not know itself before this time possessed of inspired and authoritative writings. The Gospels in particular had long been in use in the churches, and collections had early been made of Paul's Epistles. Such collections, however, grew up naturally, informally, with a view to purposes of edification, and with no idea consciously present of forming what we mean by a Canon of Scripture. We have only to recall how near the Church of second century stood to the Apostolic Age, and what stress was still laid on living Apostolic tradition, to see how far it would lie from men's minds to erect these writings of Apostles and Apostolic men into a permanent rule of faith and practice for the whole Church. Now under pressure of the Gnostic controversy, when the Church was faced with the mutilated Canon of the Marcion, and saw its borders overrun by pseudonymous [falsely named--SW] and apocryphal [doubtful--SW] productions, it was inevitable that it should be impelled to set about in right earnest making a collection of the books which it *did* regard as Apostolic--which it knew from their history and long-established use to be so--and that these should be definitely separated from the floating mass and raised to a position of exclusive [sole--SW] authority. [\(30\)](#)

Thus, if Gnosticism taught the church by its errors the necessity of an apostolic and public canon, the further phase of Gnosticism known as Marcionism made plain the danger of a mutilated canon. Thus, it impressed upon the church the necessity of maintaining the canon in its full extent without being diminished.

C. Montanism

Introduction:

As is often the case with movements which were finally rejected by the mainstream church in its earlier history, it is difficult to know how much of what the orthodox writers say about Montanism to regard as believable. Two things, however, at least tend to make our information about the Montanists more believable. First, at a number of points we

have statements by made by the Montanists themselves which tend to confirm the general view taken of them by the orthodox writers. Second, the opposition offered to the Montanists was more mixed. Thus, we have information from more orthodox writers which tends to be more sympathetic toward Montanism. The classic example of such sympathy is no one less than Tertullian himself who is often as to his later ministry identified as a Montanist. For these reasons we may be fairly confident that we have the facts about the Montanists right.

Church historians have frequently noted that Montanism represents an opposite reaction in the Second Century to Gnosticism and Marcionism. Marcionism and Gnosticism are seen as movements of a speculative and intellectual character, while Montanism is seen as more subjective or experiential and practical in character. [\(31\)](#) In this case the practical, subjective extreme appears somewhat less heretical than the theoretical, intellectual one. In fact the application of the term, heresy, in its strict sense to Montanism is not right because with regard to basic content of the orthodox faith in the second half of the second century it was orthodox. Lawlor remarks:

Montanus, it is true, did not consciously deviate [depart from--SW] from ecclesiastical dogma [official church doctrine--SW]. His opponents bear witness that he accepted the canonical Scriptures and was orthodox with regard to the resurrection of the dead and the doctrine of the Trinity. But in another sphere his innovations [inventions--SW] were considerable [significant]. [\(32\)](#)

This statement of Lawlor must be taken with some measure of qualification since neither with regard to the Canon, nor the Trinity was the doctrine of the church very defined in the late Second Century. Yet it is certainly true that Montanism's novelties while serious were not as foundational as those of Gnosticism in their character. The deviations or departures of Gnosticism and Montanism were quite dissimilar. Richardson says, "At the opposite pole to Gnosticism stands the Montanist movement ..." [\(33\)](#) This drastic difference in the two deviations served, however, to underscore two distinct concerns with regard to the subject of the new Testament canon. Bruce asserts:

The Montanist challenge from one direction, like the Marcionite and gnostic challenges from other directions, made it the more important that the limits of holy scripture should be clearly defined. Holy scripture, properly defined, would provide a check on uncontrolled prophecy as it did on a undisciplined speculation. [\(34\)](#)

It is the significance of Montanism for the New Testament canon that leads us to take it up in the present connection. We will consider it under five headings:

1. Historical Origin

2. Distinctive Identity

3. Ecclesiastical Opposition

4. Later Development

5. Canonical Significance

1. Historical Origin

Lawlor provides us with the major facts connected with the early history of Montanism:

The movement now generally known, from the name of its founder, as Montanism had its birth at a village called Ardabau in the part of Mysia adjoining Phrygia, probably not far from Philadelphia. ... There, as it seems, about A. D. 156, Montanus, a recent convert, who had been a pagan priest, began to prophesy. His prophesyings were accompanied by strange phenomena [events--SW] resembling those associated with demonical possession. After a time--as seems to be implied, a considerable [lengthy--SW] time--Montanus was joined by two women, Maximilla and Priscilla, or Prisca, who with his sanction deserted their husbands, and who also claimed to possess the prophetic charisma. Their utterances were similar in matter and in manner to those of their leader. We are not surprised to learn that this sudden outburst of prophecy, and the claims that were made for its leaders, provoked much opposition. Many of those who heard Montanus and his companions would have

silenced them. Two Phrygian bishops made an ineffectual attempt to `prove and refute' the spirit that spoke in Maximilla; another who had come from Anchiale in Thrace, attempted to exorcize [cast demons out of--SW] Priscilla. At first, we are told, the movement advanced slowly: `but few of the Phrygians were deceived.' But after a tim, it seems, the majority of the Phrygian Christians became adherents [followers] of Montanus. Thus only can we account for the fact that at an early period his followers were commonly spoken as `the Phrygians,' and their teaching as `the heresy of the Phrygians' Not long after the beginning of the prophesying Montanus crossed the Phrygian border and established himself with his followers in the city of Pepuza ... Pepuza, with the neighboring village of Tymion, he named Jerusalem. To this settlement, which was thenceforward the centre and holy city of Eastern Montanism, he endeavored to gather adherents [followers] from all quarters. these facts coupled with the lavish promises made by the prophets to their adherents [followers] and certain predictions of Maximilla ... apart from a more explicit oracle [clear prophecy--SW] attributed to another prophetess ... would lead us to the conclusion that the `new prophecy' taught men to expect in the near future, at Pepuza, the final Parousia of the Lord The primitive Montanists, in fact, held the doctrine of chiliasm [premillennialism], but chiliasm [premillennialism] of a new kind. It was this hope of the Parousia at their Jerusalem that gained for them the name of Pepuzians It is not necessary to pursue the history of Eastern Montanism in detail. For some years after the death of Maximilla, the last of the original trio, in 179-180, there were no prophets, and the church and the world enjoyed peace--facts which, as anti-Montanistic writers pointed out, disproved the claims of the first prophets. [\(35\)](#)

To this basic account there needs to be added only two additional comments. First, the reason that the death of Maximilla tended to disprove the Montanist prophecy is that she had associated her death with the end of the age. [\(36\)](#) Second, it is important to note that Phrygia was noted for a national tendency to ecstatic forms of religion. This is a kind of religion that claims direct revelation from God which causes its recipients to behave wildly. Says Bonwetsch, "Montanus, but recently become a Christian, appeared in a village of Phrygia as such a prophet.

He is said by Jerome to have been formerly a priest of Cybele, and the 'new prophecy' was doubtless influenced by the wild enthusiasm of the Phrygian religious nature." [\(37\)](#)

2. Distinctive Identity

Introduction:

We have already noted that in substance the Montanist tended to support Second Century Christian orthodoxy, especially as over against the Gnostic heretics. Nevertheless, their deviations or departures were serious enough eventually to draw down upon their heads the ecclesiastical censure or official rebuke of the 'Old Catholic Church'. We must briefly elaborate four of their distinctive peculiarities.

a. Their New Prophetism

The orthodox writers are filled with polemic or arguments against the novel form which the Montanist prophecy took, and it seems to safe to assume that the 'new prophecy' was quite different from that to which the church was accustomed or used to in its remembered experience and in its sacred writings. Lawlor remarks:

In what way his exercise of the prophetic charisma [gift--SW] was regarded by his opponents as differing from that of the genuine prophets we have various hints from nearly contemporary documents: he spoke while he was actually in a state of ecstasy; the true prophets received their message in ecstasy [a state in which one loses control of oneself--SW], but did not deliver it till their faculties returned to a normal condition. Moreover, the 'ecstasy' of Montanus was kind of madness deliberately induced, whereas prophets, acknowledged as such by the Church, even when in a state of ecstasy, were of sound mind; In agreement with these statements an oracle of Montanus declares that the prophet is as a lyre played upon by the divine plectrum; and the form in which most of his extant utterances are cast implies that he was a mere passive instrument, and that the phrases which fell from his lips were actually the *ipsissima verba* [very words--SW] of the Deity. His opponents reminded him of the style of the ancient prophets, who as human agents proclaimed

the will of God--`Thus saith the Lord.'[\(38\)](#)

The Montanist reply to the orthodox contrasts between the prophetic form of Montanism and biblical prophecy acknowledged that the contrast was real, but explained it on the grounds of its finality and supremacy of their prophecies.

There can be no doubt that Montanus maintained that this `new prophesying' differed essentially from all preceding prophecy. Thus the novelty of its form was to be explained. It was the fulfillment--so it was alleged--of the Lord's promise of the coming of the Paraclete (John 14:12-18). The apostles had not the perfection of the holy Spirit (1 Cor. 13:8-10); this was reserved for the new prophets, of whom Christ spoke in Matt. 23:34. This is stated to be the Montanist doctrine by many writers, and it is the basis of the exaggerated [extreme--SW] assertion of Eusebius ... that Montanus claimed that he himself was the Paraclete.[\(39\)](#)

This view of themselves and the new prophecy inevitably, though perhaps not intentionally, tended to the idea that it overruled all previous revelation. Says Lawlor again:

It is evident that the acceptance of the `new prophecy' as embodying the final teaching of the Paraclete, and as in some sense superseding earlier revelation, was the cardinal principle of Montanism. This is made manifest by the very phrase `new prophecy' constantly used by its adherents [followers]; by the title which they arrogated [usurped or siezed--SW] to themselves, as distinguishing them from other Christians () ... and by the polemics of anti-Montanist writers, whose argument is mainly directed to proving that this `so-called prophecy' was in truth a false prophecy proceeding from the spirit of evil.[\(40\)](#)

The implicit or subtle canonical claims of such a view of its prophecies cannot be avoided. In some sense Montanist prophecy claimed to bring to completion previous revelation. This seems to mean that it claimed a relation to the New Testament writings somewhat similar to that which the new Testament writings claim to the Old Testament. Bonwetsch agrees:

The Montanists appealed in support of their own form of prophecy to the examples of ecstasy [a state in which the prophet loses control of his body--SW] recorded in the Bible, yet at the same time claimed that their mode was a proof of the magnitude of the new revelation. It was, indeed, the completion of the law of Christ, and in it the promised Paraclete had appeared, since the time of full maturity had now replaced childhood (1 Cor. 13:11). The new prophecy, therefore, not only was a protest against suppression, but also claimed the right, in view of the approaching end of all things, to regulate life in the Church. [\(41\)](#)

b. Their Peculiar Chiliasm [Premillennialism]

The peculiar form of Premillennialism held by the Montanists has already been noted. Their extremes had the marked tendency to bring disrepute upon Premillennialism in the early church and may have contributed to its gradual demise. It also tended to have a specific influence on canonical matters. This happened because some reacting against Montanism began to reject the writings of John to which Montanism made such frequent reference. F. F. Bruce describes this reaction as follows:

One interesting by-product of the Montanist movement was the suspicion which it engendered [caused--SW] in some people's minds against the Johannine literature [books written by John--SW] of the new Testament, to which Montanists so confidently appealed. Their doctrine of the second advent was based on a literal interpretation of the millenium mentioned in the book of Revelation, and there were those who found it impossible to reject this Montanist doctrine without at the same time rejecting the book of Revelation. One of those who rejected the book was a Roman presbyter named Gaius, author of a *Dialogue* in which he maintained a debate with Proclus, leader of the Montanists in his day (c. 200). Apparently Gaius attributed the book to Cerinthus, a heretic who flourished about the end of the first century. But there is reason to believe that Gaius also rejected the apostolic authority of the Fourth Gospel, from which, of course, the Montanists drew their doctrine of the Paraclete. ... Gaius had no great following in his view of the Fourth Gospel, however; a small group of people who maintained a view similar to his, but (like him) were orthodox in all other respects, are referred to by a fourth-century writer as the *Alogoi*. [\(42\)](#)

c. Their Ancient Feminism

Montanism, because of the early prominence of the prophetesses, Priscilla and Maximilla, was characterized by a feminism inconsistent with the views of the church in its day. Lawlor recounts:

... the association with Montanus of two prophetesses involved the recognition [acceptance--SW] that women might hold high office in the Church. Maximilla and Priscilla seem to have made independent contributions to Montanist teaching ... and they were probably in the habit of prophesying in the congregation ... There is evidence that, at any rate in later times, other women followed their example ..., or even outdid it; for we read of a prophetess in Cappadocia in the 3rd cent., perhaps a Montanist, who baptized and celebrated the Eucharist ... of female bishops and priests, and of virgins who regularly officiated [officially presided--SW] in the congregation at Pepuza ... [\(43\)](#)

d. Their Ethical Rigorism [Strictness]

The ethical rigorism or strictness of Montanism and its tendency to asceticism was related to its imminent or soon expectation of the end of the world. Says Bonwetsch:

The entire purpose, in fact, of the new prophecy was preparation for the approaching end, and expectation of this great event should determine the entire life of the Christian. Yet the new prophecy was seldom introduced by new forms; what had hitherto been voluntary now became duty. Thus, if the Church approved only first marriage and virginity, the Montanists regarded second marriages as impure and excluded those who contracted them. Sexual purity was a necessary condition for receiving revelations, and the voluntary fasts on the "station days" were extended from three to six in the afternoon and made obligatory [morally necessary--SW]. ... Again, wherever the Church permitted a distinction between a laxer [looser--SW] and a stricter rule, the Montanists invariably allowed only the latter, so that for example, flight [running away--SW] in persecution was forbidden and martyrdom was encouraged. All these requirements were made by the Paraclete because

the last day was nigh, and the marriage should no longer be contracted. Because of the shortness of the time, the Paraclete could annul the words of Paul as Christ had abrogated [abolished--SW] those of Moses. (44)

Concluding Observations:

Montanism presents us with a remarkable combination of traits which anticipate later abnormal movements in the church. The intense, eschatological expectation; the claims to prophecy, the neglect of the created boundaries between men and women, and even the ethical rigorism have re-emerged or come out again in varying combinations again and again. One need only think of certain Anabaptist groups, the older Pentecostalist groups, and even the Charismatics of our own day. The re-emergence again and again of such groups with their unique combination of traits constrains us to ask what response and evaluation the earliest church gave to Montanism. Its response cannot but be of intense interest for us.

3. Ecclesiastical Opposition

Montanism did not long exist before it began to meet with the formal opposition of catholic bishops. Says Lawlor:

While the movement was still in its infancy, Claudius Apollinarius, bishop of Hierapolis, wrote a treatise [book--SW] against it, to which were appended the signatures of many bishops, at least one of whom came from Thrace. Other confutations of the new teaching followed it ... Many synods met in Asia and excommunicated its adherents [followers]. ... It is impossible to determine with accuracy the date of the inevitable crisis; but it is certain that in Phrygia before the year 177 the Montanists were excluded from the Catholic Church ... (45)

Swift and firm as this response appears, Montanism was not everywhere met with as unqualified and absolute disapproval. The Christians of Gaul, while opposing the Montanists, wrote to Rome pleading for moderation with regard to some of their views. (46) Even more sympathetic to the Montanist was the great African bishop, Tertullian, whom we must now consider.

4. Later Development

Despite its condemnation by catholic bishops, Montanism spread to many parts of the Roman Empire. Its spread cost it, however, both its unity and many of its distinctive features. Noting that the early Montanists were productive writers, and that among the Montanists tended to be regarded as in some sense canonical, Lawlor goes on to comment:

A necessary result of this was the tendency to division. The Montanists must have regarded the writings of their own prophets as of at least equal value with the Scriptures: they constituted in fact, if not in intention, an enlargement of the Canon. It was inevitable that they should be used, like the canonical Scriptures, as authoritative expositions of dogmatic [officially doctrinal--SW] Christianity, and that, like them, they should be variously interpreted. By the end of the 2nd cent. there were two parties of the Montanists, who took different sides in the Monarchian controversy, and both of them appealed to the oracles of the prophets as well as to the Scriptures ... Thus the authority ascribed to the writings of the prophets produced a tendency to the formation of parties differing from one another in matters of faith, and probably also in matters of discipline. This tendency would be greater if, as seems likely, such writings were not collected into a *Corpus*. Each community would follow the teaching of the teaching of such books as they happened to possess, without the obligation of harmonizing it with that of the books possessed by other communities. (47)

The certain or inevitable result of this kind of division was the breaking of Montanism into many different parties in different regions. Lawlor confirms: "It is perhaps scarcely correct to speak of Montanism as a sect. In its later stages it was rather a congeries [varied series--SW] of sects somewhat loosely held together by an acknowledgment of the manifestation of the Paraclete in Montanus." (48)

It is this that forms the necessary starting-point for the discussion of Tertullian's alleged [supposed--SW] Montanism. Most of the time they somehow limit their statements. Yet, writers often assert quite emphatically that Tertullian was a Montanist. Richardson, for instance,

writes: "... it passed eventually to North Africa, where it won for its cause the vehement Tertullian, in whose writings it takes on a severely puritanical note." (49) If Tertullian is to be called a Montanist at all, it should be only with the most severe limitations or qualification. The fact is that the Montanism he embraced was significantly different than that which raged in Phrygia in the late second century. Bonwetsch writes, "Montanism spread to the West with a suppression of its ecstatic features and emphasis on its ethical requirements." (50) Lawlor confirms this, but gives his opinion that Tertullian was unaware of the extent of the differences: "Montanism, as it appears in the pages of Tertullian, differs so much, and withal is so little conscious of difference, from the Montanism of Phrygia that we are compelled to suppose that his acquaintance with the teaching of the prophets was imperfect." (51)

Lawlor catalogs a number of the differences between Tertullian and the original Montanism. There is no hint of the strange phenomena which accompanied Phrygian prophecy in Tertullian. Tertullian affirms against the Phrygian Montanism that the apostles possessed the fullness of the Spirit. Tertullian never mentions Pepuza. Tertullian refused to allow a woman to speak in the church, or to teach, baptize, administer the Lord's Table, or "to assume any function which belongs to a man". (52)

5. Canonical Significance

The above exposition of Montanism fully justifies the multitude of witness among church historians who confirm the important, canonical significance of the Montanist movement. Their significance was, of course, wholly negative. In other words, the early church saw in them the catastrophe which awaited if the stop sign or red light signalling the close of the canon was ignored. Richardson is, then, perfectly correct when he asserts:

The Catholic opposition to Montanism rested on the conviction that the Christian revelation was complete. Nothing new in principle could be added to the apostolic deposit of the faith. The Church, too, was cautious about ecstasies in which the prophet lost the use of his reason and identified himself with God. "I am come neither as an angel, nor as an ambassador, but as God the Father," said Montanus. Against such

extravagant claims, the Church insisted on the sufficiency of the apostolic tradition. (53)

III. The Later Agreement

Introduction:

The sum of the preceding discussion of the Apostolic Fathers and the early heresies has been to emphasize and make clear the idea of apostolic authority. The post-apostolic church comes into our view with a clear grasp on the distinct difference between its leaders and teachers and the authority of apostles. It comes into our view with a clear practical commitment to their writings, especially the four Gospels and the Epistles of Paul.

This original grasp on apostolic authority is strengthened by the early heresies which Providence arranged to attack the church in second century. Gnosticism's claim to a secret and secret revelation emphasized the public witness of the Apostles especially as crystallized in their writings. Marcionism's mutilation of the Apostolic tradition alerted the church to the danger of a one-sided and biased limitation of the Apostolic tradition. Thus, a sign was given emphasizing the importance of maintaining the full extent of the New Testament canon. Montanism came, however, just in time to keep the church from wrongly enlarging the canon of Scripture. Its excesses and extravagances clearly underscored the dangers associated with any failure to limit the canon to the Apostolic age and writings.

It is in the light of this making clear and carefully stating the significance of the Apostolic canon of the church that we may accept and amen the words of Brown as he summarizes the result of the controversies of the second century:

We may consider that the New Testament canon was effectively complete by A. D. 200, although a few books remained controversial until into the fourth century. The closing of the canon was of tremendous importance, because it meant that from then on theological disputes could no longer affect the source of doctrine, the text of Scripture itself. From this virtual

closing of the New Testament canon in about 200, it will take two and one half more centuries for Christianity to reach agreement on two of its most fundamental doctrines: the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the one person and two natures of Christ. [\(54\)](#)

The words of Brown as he has qualified himself may be accepted as an accurate account of the situation at the close of the Second century. He is right to see that in the clarification of the idea of the public nature, the full extent, and the closed character of the Apostolic canon, the question and character of the New Testament canon was effectively closed by A. D. 200. We must, however, now come to consider the evidence for Brown's assertion and how these controlling and specific perspectives came to final and formal expression in the official acceptance of the New Testament canon in the Old Catholic Church. We will do this by utilizing the accepted distinction implied in Brown's words between the books of the New Testament known as the Homologoumena and those known as the Antilegomena.

A. The Universal and Early Acceptance of the Homologoumena

1. The Canon of Muratori

As if to underscore the significance of the early heresies we have noticed for the acceptance of the New Testament canon, the Canon of Muratori which may be dated "at the end of the second century" [\(55\)](#) provides us with the first orthodox listing of the books of the New Testament canon. The document in which this canon comes down to us is in a fragmentary condition. It begins, for instance, with the words, "the third book of the gospel; according to Luke" [\(56\)](#). As this illustrates, some of the problems created by the fragmentary character of the document can be solved. Obviously, the canon commenced with Matthew and Mark. Assuming that the list began with Matthew and Mark, twenty-two of the books which we have received in our New Testaments are listed in this canon as acceptable. The ones missing are Hebrews, 3 John, James, 1 Peter, and 2 Peter.

Two books were included in this canon which are not in our New Testaments. They are the Wisdom of Solomon and the Apocalypse of

Peter. [\(57\)](#) There is a note, however, that Peter's Apocalypse is not regarded as canonical by some. The reference to the Wisdom of Solomon is odd because it is part of the Old Testament Apocrypha. The Shepherd of Hermas is mentioned favorably, but denied canonical status because "the Shepherd was written by Hermas in the city of Rome quite recently, in our own times, when his brother Pius occupied the bishop's chair in the church of the city of Rome; and therefore it may be read indeed, but cannot be given out to the people in church either among the prophets, since their number is complete, or among the apostles at the end of the times."

More interesting for our purposes is the mention of a number of Marcionite and Gnostic writings which are completely rejected. The fragment first mentions Marcionite forgeries: "There is said to be another letter in Paul's name to the Laodiceans, and another to the Alexandrines, [both] forged in accordance with Marcion's heresy, and many others which cannot be received into the catholic church, since it is not fitting that poison should be mixed with honey." Later the fragment mentions other Gnostic productions: "But none of the writings of Arsinous or Valentinus or Miltiades do we receive at all. They have also composed a new book of psalms for Marcion; [these we reject] together with Basilides [and] the Asian founder of the Cataphrygians ..."

In these two parts of the Muratorian canon there is, then, explicit reference to and replies to the three distinct heresies we have dealt with above. Plainly, the existence and forgeries of these heresies was one of the factors which led to the writing of this the first, orthodox listing of the canonical books of the New Testament which we possess. This is explicit proof for the significance of these heresies in the formulation of the New Testament canon.

2. Irenaeus

Irenaeus also stands just at the close of the period of the early heresies we have discussed. We know that he was elected bishop of Lyons shortly after the year 177. Significantly for our thesis Irenaeus' main written work was a response to the gnostic heresies which he entitled, *An Exposure and Refutation of the Knowledge that is Falsely So Called*. [This work is

commonly known from its Latin title as *Against Heresies*.] Bruce properly remarks, therefore, "Irenaeus is the principal spokesman of the catholic response to Gnosticism and other second-century deviations [departures--SW]." [\(58\)](#)

It is most significant, therefore, that obvious progress has been made in the making clear of the New Testament canon in the mind of Irenaeus. Bruce further remarks:

In all Irenaeus's argument, moreover, scripture plays a dominant part. It is the abiding witness to the one living and true God, 'whom the law announces, whom the prophets proclaim, whom Christ reveals, whom the apostles teach, whom the church believes'. Irenaeus is well able to distinguish 'the writings of truth' from 'the multitude of apocryphal and spurious [doubtful and false--SW] writings'. ... As for the New Testament, Hans von Campenhausen describes 'the critical period between Marcion and Irenaeus' as 'the period in which the "New Testament" as such emerged'. Irenaeus nowhere in his extant writings sets down a list of New Testament books, but it is evident that he had a clear notion of their identity. He makes free use of the phraseology about 'old covenant' and 'new covenant', but does not yet use the latter expression to denote [mean--SW] the collection of authoritative writings thrown up by the new covenant, as Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian of Carthage were soon to do. The collection itself, however, was a reality to him. In using the scriptures to expose and refute subversive [traitorous--SW] teaching, it was important to know which scriptures might effectively be so used, and he knew them, and used them. [\(59\)](#)

Irenaeus' New Testament canon is remarkably close to that of the Canon of Muratori. Bruce remarks:

Irenaeus, in fact, recognized and appealed to the same collection of Christian writings as listed in the Muratorian fragment, except that he included 1 Peter, which is not mentioned there. If the Muratorian list is of Roman origin, it may have been during one of his earlier visits to Rome that Irenaeus became acquainted with the contents of the 'New Testament' scriptures acknowledged in the church of the capital. Perhaps we should be warned against calling it a 'closed' canon by the very fact

that it was later added to; but it was envisaged as a coherent corpus [a consistent body--SW], comprising [made up of--SW] twenty-two books--all the books of the final New Testament, indeed, except Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude.

The Old and New Testaments together provided Irenaeus with a broad and secure foundation not only for the negative purpose of refuting heresy but even more for the positive exposition of what has been called 'the biblical theology of St Irenaeus'. From his time on, the whole church in east and west has acknowledged the New Testament collection as making up, together with the Old Testament, the Christian Bible. [\(60\)](#)

3. Tertullian

Tertullian's writings belong to the period AD 196-212. It is in his writings that we first find the designation 'New Testament' for the second part of the Christian Bible. [\(61\)](#) He did not use the word, canon, but approved of the idea it later came to express. [\(62\)](#) Tertullian's canon certainly included the homologoumena plus Revelation and Jude. He knows and likes Hebrews and compares it favorably to the book he called 'the Shepherd of the Adulterers'. Though it had not come down to him in North Africa as canonical, he regarded it as the work of Barnabas and worthy to be ranked with the apostolic writings. [\(63\)](#) Thus, we see again a stable New Testament canon of 23 or 24 books similar to that of the Canon of Muratori and Irenaeus.

4. Clement of Alexandria

This Clement was a contemporary of Tertullian from Alexandria in Egypt. In some respects he echoes Tertullian. Bruce remarks, "In reference to Christian writings Clement's catholicity is equally evident. He speaks of the two parts of the Christian Bible as the Old Testament and New Testament." [\(64\)](#) In other respects, however, reflects the looser and more carefree attitude of Alexandria with regard to the canon. This means that he cites in addition to the canonical books a number of books not found in our New Testaments. [\(65\)](#)

5. Origen

Origen also sets a New Testament collection of books beside the Old Testament. Bruce comments:

That Origen did recognize a New Testament collection alongside the Old Testament is certain, although he expresses himself as if the use of the word 'Testament' ... in this sense were fairly new in his circle: he speaks of 'what we believe to be the divine scriptures both of the Old Testament, as people say, and of the New {Testament}, as it is called.' [\(66\)](#)

Origen also advances the discussion of the New Testament canon by mentioning all the books of our New Testament and classing them as either undisputed or disputed. Undisputed are the homologoumena and Revelation. Disputed are Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James and Jude. Among the disputed he also places some books which in the end did not qualify for the New Testament canon. These included the Epistle of Barnabas and the Didache.

6. The Early Versions

Westcott places not a little importance on the testimony of two early versions to the acceptance of the New Testament canon, the old Syriac version known as the Peshitta and the old Latin version of North Africa known as the Itala. [\(67\)](#) He begins, however, by admitting that enormous difficulties beset any inquiry into or study of these early versions. Thus, some measure of caution is necessary with regard to their contents. It does appear, however, that in Syria and North Africa even as early as around the middle of the Second century versions of the New Testament were used which confirm the early and universal acceptance of the homologoumena. Westcott concludes that the early Peshitta included a canon of 22 books and omitted only 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, the Epistle of St. Jude, and the Apocalypse of John. [\(68\)](#) The canon of the Itala according to Westcott also witnesses to the acceptance of the homologoumena. It certainly contained 24 books, may also have contained Hebrews, and omitted only James and 2 Peter.

Westcott argues that the canon of the Eastern churches suggested by the Peshitta and that of the Western churches represented by the Itala should

be combined. He says:

To obtain a complete idea of the judgment of the Church we must combine the two Canons; and then it will be found that of the books which we receive one only, the second Epistle of Peter, wants the earliest public sanction of ecclesiastical use as an Apostolic work. In other words, by enlarging our view so as to comprehend the whole of Christendom and unite the different lines of Apostolic tradition, we obtain with one exception a perfect New Testament, without the admixture of any foreign element. [\(69\)](#)

Conclusion:

Westcott contends for an almost perfect canon by the middle of the Second century. But even if we do not agree with him, there are a multitude of witnesses confirm that the homologoumena were the assured canonical possession of the Christian church by the end of the Second century.

B. The Universal and Later Acceptance of the Antilegomena

1. An Explanation of the Delay

At this point a factor which accounts for the delay in the universal acceptance of the Antilegomena must be mentioned. The question may be raised: If canonical books possessed original authority with the church because of their apostolic authorship, why were some so seriously questioned before being universally accepted? Unlike the Old Testament people of God, the church was of vast geographical extent. Unlike the Old Testament people of God, it had no center like Jerusalem to promote with authority the recognized canonical books. Jerusalem was destroyed and the mother church there scattered while the New Testament was still being written. We must, therefore, take into account the hindrances of geographical limitation and poor communication in delaying the acceptance of certain books universally. [\(70\)](#) Because of such factors some writings (which had complete acceptance in the region of the church where they had originated) were questioned in another region.

2. An Explanation of their Acceptance

Why and how did the Antilegomena gain acceptance? Two factors seem to have been vital. First, the growing unity of the church in the Roman Empire removed questions about some books because their complete acceptance by the rest of the church became known. Second, the character, the actual self-authenticating truth and content, of the genuine books exercised a great influence.

3. An Explanation of the Difficulties

Here we shall show that the reasons the different books of the Antilegomena were questioned are consistent with their original authority and authentic canonicity.

a. Hebrews and Revelation

These two of the seven Antilegomena contain over 80% of their content. For this reason the fact that they were questioned may raise the most severe problems in some minds. There is good reason, however, to conclude that the difficulties raised over them came up later. Herman Ridderbos properly remarks:

Uncertainty about some of those writings, it should be noted, only arose later, as a result of certain actions that occurred within or against the church. That is the case, for example, for two of the most widespread instances of uncertainty: doubt about canonicity of Hebrews in the West and about the Book of Revelation in the East. Opposition to the Book of Revelation in the East, as is well known, was late in origin and was the result of dogmatic, antichilastic [doctrinal convictions which rejected premillennialism] considerations. Apparently, objections to the canonicity of Hebrews were not "original" nor did they occur primarily because its Pauline authorship was doubted. Rather, those objections were late and arose because of the Montanist appeal to Hebrews 6:4. Indeed, the Book of Hebrews was already in use sometime between A. D. 90 and 100 by Clement of Rome and later was also cited by Tertullian. Moreover, as Van Unnik has recently demonstrated between A. D. 140 and 150 in Rome all sorts of expressions from Hebrews were a part of the language of the

church in the same manner as phraseology from other writings that were never contested in the West. Thus here, too, it appears that only later reflection damaged the authority a document had from the beginning and destroyed the original certainty of the church. [\(71\)](#)

b. 2 and 3 John and Jude

Though there is good historical evidence for these books, it may be of less extent than that which supports the Homologoumena. The very probable reason for this is simply their brevity. This made it easy for them to be overlooked and improbable that they should be quoted as extensively as the larger books of the New Testament.

c. James

There is early historical evidence for the canonicity of James. "Clement of Rome uses the Epistle of James, as does Hermas. It is included in the Peshitto version." [\(72\)](#) The questions over the canonicity of James may have arisen, according to Harris, may have arisen due to confusion over the exact identity of the James which authored it, since there are at least three James in the New Testament with apostolic claims.

d. 2 Peter

The external, historical evidence for 2 Peter is the most limited of any of the New Testament canonical books. Origen is the first to mention the book by name and seems to regard it as canonical, though he mentions that some Christians had doubts on this matter. Guthrie cites a number of very early Christian writings which may manifest dependence on 2 Peter and thus support to some extent an apostolic source for the epistle. [\(73\)](#) Among such books are Clement of Alexandria's Hypotoposes. Others who may allude to 2 Peter are Theophilus of Antioch, Aristides, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr. The pseudepigraphical [falsely named--SW] Apocalypse of Peter which dates from the first half of the second century alludes [refers--SW] repeatedly to 2 Peter. Some have argued, however, that the dependence is in an opposite direction. Guthrie concludes his survey with these remarks, "It would seem a fair conclusion to this survey of external evidence to submit that there is no evidence from any part of

the early Church that this Epistle was ever rejected as spurious, in spite of the hesitance which existed over its reception." [\(74\)](#) In light of our commitment to a presumption in favor of the received canon and the universal reception of this letter as canonical during the fourth century, the historical evidence appears to be consistent with the canonicity of 2 Peter.

Several reasons may be assigned which explain the origin of the questions regarding 2 Peter. There was a large corpus [body--SW] of pseudepigraphical [falsely named--SW] literature bearing the name of Peter. This may have cast its shadow on 2 Peter. There were certain obvious differences in language style between 1 Peter and 2 Peter. This may have caused some to look with suspicion on 2 Peter. Such differences in style may be explained in a number of different ways which have been suggested by interpreters. Probably the best explanation is that Silas helped Peter write 1 Peter (and cleaned up his Greek). Notice 1 Pet. 5:12. 2 Peter's rough style of Greek may indicate that Peter wrote that letter without help.

Culminating Observations:

The final movement of the church to agreement on the New Testament canon may be sketched by brief reference to two men that summarize the process that was taking place throughout the church in the Roman Empire.

Eusebius of the Bishop of Caesarea marks the transition from the Ante-Nicene to the Post-Nicene Fathers. He provides us with a representative sample of the state of opinion with regard to the New Testament canon at the close of the era of persecution and at the opening of the Constantinian period. His statements are explicit, although not without some uncertainties. He divides the books making a claim to New Testament canonicity into three categories: the acknowledged, the disputed (questioned), and the spurious (false). The acknowledged are exactly equivalent to the homologoumena. Also within this category he places John's Apocalypse adding the words, "should it seem right". The disputed are exactly equivalent to the remaining six books of the antilegomena. Of them he says that they are disputed, "but recognized by the majority."

The spurious books include the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd, Barnabas, and the Didache and also John's Apocalypse of which he again says, "should it seem right". Why Eusebius places the Apocalypse of John among the acknowledged and also the spurious books, but not among the disputed is a difficult question, but the explanation is probably connected with Eusebius dislike of its apparent Premillenarianism. (75) In Eusebius we see how swiftly the church was moving to consensus on the New Testament.

As Eusebius represents the next to last stage of canonical development, so Athanasius represents the last stage. Bruce tells us, "Athanasius is the first writer known to us who listed exactly the twenty-seven books which traditionally make up the New Testament in catholic and orthodox Christianity, without making any distinction of status among them." (76) This occurred in AD 367.

1. Richardson, loc. cit., p. 26.
2. Richardson, loc. cit., p. 24.
3. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies*, (Doubleday, Garden City, 1984), p. 50.
4. Brown, loc. cit., pp. 57, 58.
5. Brown, loc. cit., p. 59.
6. *ibid.*
7. John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1983), p. 45.
8. Kelly, loc. cit., p. 142.
9. Brown, loc. cit., p. 44.
10. Kelly, loc. cit., p. 24.
11. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, p. 249.

12. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 26.
13. Brown, loc. cit., p.44.
14. Kelly, loc. cit., p. 27.
15. Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans*, chapters 2 and 3.
16. Ignatius, *To the Ephesians*, 10:3; *To the Magnesians* 13:2.
17. Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans*, chapter 7.
18. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings, vol. VI, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1922), p. 232.
19. Kelly, loc. cit., p. 40.
20. *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia*, ed. by Samuel MaCauley Jackson, vol. VII, (Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1910), p. 172.
21. *The New Schaff-Herzog ...*, *ibid.*, p. 173.
22. *The New Schaff Herzog ...*, *ibid.*
23. *The New Schaff-Herzog ...*, *ibid.*, p. 173.
24. *The New Schaff-Herzog ...*, *ibid.*, p. 172.
25. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 134.
26. Kelly, loc. cit., p. 57.
27. Note Richardson's comment to this effect, loc. cit., p. 22, "The Catholic canon was doubtless framed with marcion's in view ..."
28. Kelly, loc. cit., pp. 57, 58.
29. Kelly, loc. cit., p. 58.
30. James Orr, *Progress of Dogma*, pp. 64, 65.

31. Note the graph by Robert C. Walton, in *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1986), # 78.
32. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings, vol. VIII, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1922), H. J. Lawlor, "Montanism," 1922, p. 829.
33. Richardson, loc. cit., p. 25.
34. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 168.
35. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, loc. cit., pp. 828,829.
36. *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia*, vol. VII, p. 485.
37. *ibid.*
38. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, loc. cit., p. 828.
39. *ibid.*
40. *ibid.*
41. *The New Schaff-Herzog ...*, loc. cit., p. 486.
42. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, p. 220.
43. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, loc. cit., p. 829.
44. *The New Schaff-Herzog ...*, loc. cit., p. 486.
45. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, loc. cit., p. 828.
46. *ibid*, p. 830.
47. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, loc. cit., p. 830.
48. *ibid.*

49. Richardson, loc. cit., p. 25.

50. *The New Schaff-Herzog ...*, loc. cit., p. 487.

51. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, loc. cit., p. 831.

52. *ibid.*

53. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

54. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

55. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 158.

56. Bruce, *The Canon ...*, p. 159. Bruce provides a translation of what he calls the Muratorian fragment on pages 159 through 161 of this book.

57. Zahn conjecturally emended the reference to "the Apocalypse of John we also receive, and that of Peter, which some will not have read in church" to "the Apocalypse of John, we also receive and Peter's [epistle. There is also another of Epistle of Peter,] which some will not have read in church". Cf. Bruce, *The Canon ...*, p. 165.

58. Bruce, *The Canon ...*, p. 171.

59. Bruce, *The Canon ...*, p. 173.

60. Bruce, *The Canon ...*, p. 177. Several other interesting facts about Irenaeus' canon which seem to closely associate it with the Muratorian fragment are that he seems once to cite the Shepherd of Hermas as Scripture and also the Wisdom of Solomon. He does not mention the Apocalypse of Peter. There are also possible references to Hebrews and James.

61. Bruce, *The Canon ...*, p. 180.

62. *ibid.*, p. 182.

63. *ibid.*, p. 183.

64. *ibid.*, p. 188.

65. *ibid.*, pp. 188f.

66. *ibid.*, p. 192.

67. Westcott, *op. cit.*, pp. 235ff.

68. Westcott, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

69. Westcott, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

70. Westcott, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-5.

71. Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1988), p. 44.

72. R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity*, p. 262.

73. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, (Inter-Varsity, Downers Grove, 1979), pp. 815-819.

74. *ibid.*

75. Bruce, *The Canon ...*, pp. 197-199.

76. *ibid.*, p. 209.