

# **How the Canonicity of the Bible was Established**

[Ohio Conference of the Michigan District, January 22, 1973]

*By: Wilbert R. Gawrisch*

The question of the canon is obviously one of vital importance. Our hope for salvation rests on God's promises to us in the Bible. By nature we are spiritually blind, doomed to eternal death in hell. We can find no way out of our desperate situation by ourselves. But God in his grace has given his only-begotten Son to be our Savior. This good news is the gospel. We know the gospel only because God himself has revealed it to us in the Bible. How important and how precious the Bible is to us!

Since our hope for eternal life is based on the Bible, it is important also that we know what books belong to the Bible. The reliability and trustworthiness of the Bible is at stake in the question of the canon. What miserable creatures of uncertainty we would be if we did not have the assurance that God is actually speaking to us through the pages of this Book!

Our Bible consists of 66 separate books. There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. We accept these 66 books as canonical. We recognize them as the inspired, inerrant, infallible and authoritative Word of our God.

But how was this canon established? How can we be certain that all 66 of these books actually are the Word of God? What reasons do we have for believing that the book of Ecclesiastes belongs to the Old Testament but that the book of Ecclesiasticus is apocryphal? What about the Epistle of James in the New Testament or the Revelation of St. John? Are these canonical? Are we dependent on the opinion of certain human authorities or the pronouncements of certain church councils for our assurance that the books we have in our Bible really belong in it? How can we know which writings are canonical and which ones are not? These are questions that demand answers. Yes, the question of the canon is a crucial one.

Many learned books and monographs have been written on the subject of the canon. The church has reason to be grateful to its scholars for their painstaking research and intensive study in this area of church history. Their careful investigation has uncovered many interesting aspects of God's gracious providence in preserving his precious, saving Word for future generations.

When reading what has been written on the matter of the canon, one may, however, perhaps get the impression that this is a very complex and perplexing subject. Names and dates together with lists of accepted and contested books flit across the pages in bewildering profusion. The ordinary Christian may be tempted to throw up his hands in despair and say, "That's all too complicated for me. I think I had better leave it to the experts."

It is not the aim of this paper to review all the details of canon history, interesting though they are. Our aim is rather to discuss the basic principles involved in establishing the sacred canon. These principles are simple and clear. They are derived from the Bible itself. It is our hope that a clear understanding of these scriptural truths will lead all of us to continue to read our Bibles with confidence. Our Christian faith centers in the Savior who reveals himself to us in this Book. He would have us read this Book with the firm assurance that he is speaking to us through its pages.

But what is the basis for our assurance? Why do we hold that the 66 books of the Bible comprise the canon of sacred Scripture? In this paper we wish to point out that our conviction is based on three fundamental scriptural principles. The first principle involved in establishing the canonicity of the Bible is the absolute authority of our Savior Jesus Christ.

*Our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, is for us Christians the ultimate and absolute authority in establishing the canon.*

The word “canon” comes from a Greek word that means a measuring stick, a standard of judgment, a norm, or rule. It is a word that occurs several times in the New Testament (Ga 6:16; 2 Cor 10:13,15,16; and a textually suspect occurrence in Php 3:16). We can readily see how it is used from Galatians 6:16, where Paul writes, “And as many as walk according to this rule [*kanon*], peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.” The rule according to which Christians are walking, as we see from the context, is the gospel of Christ crucified. Those who “walk according to this rule” are those who believe the gospel.

Some years later the church fathers came to speak of the whole corpus of Christian doctrine as “the rule of faith” or “the rule of truth” [*kanon tes pisteos, kanon tes aletheias, regula fidei*]. It was a natural development, then, when the church appropriated the term “canon” to designate the collection of holy writings that constitute the standard, norm, and rule for Christian faith and life. Those books according to which all belief and behavior are to be judged were recognized as comprising the sacred canon. They were acknowledged as being authoritative.

But how did the church come to recognize their authority?

Basically, it was a matter of recognizing the authority of Jesus Christ. Self-evidently, we Christians joyfully and thankfully acknowledge his authority. This is a natural result of our faith. Jesus is our Redeemer and Savior. By his perfect, vicarious obedience to God’s law and by his innocent suffering and death as our Substitute he has delivered us from sin, death, and hell. Everlasting life is ours through his redemptive work. It would be unthinkable for us not to love him, not to trust in him, not to follow him.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. When he speaks to us, we listen to him. We listen joyfully and eagerly, paying close attention to his every word. We listen with implicit faith because we know that he cannot and will not deceive us. We listen with hearts that are gratefully ready to do his bidding. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me,” our Good Shepherd says (Jn 10:27).

The words of our Savior are so precious to us because the Holy Spirit comes to us through them and gives us the heavenly treasures of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life,” our Lord Jesus tells us (Jn 6:63). Our attitude is therefore that of the Apostle Peter. When many of Jesus’ disciples deserted him after his strong assertion that he was the only Way to eternal life, he asked the Twelve, “Will ye also go away?” Speaking for the apostles, Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68).

We have taken the time to remind ourselves of these basic truths because they are the reason why our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, is for us Christians the ultimate and absolute authority in establishing the canon. He is for us Christians the ultimate and absolute authority in all matters of faith and life. Because he is our Savior, our confidence in him is unqualified. We trust him completely. We remember his promise, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (Jn 8:31,32). How wonderfully he has fulfilled that promise! In our lives we have personally experienced the joy of knowing the truth and the peace that comes with being truly free.

Yes, Jesus is a sure and safe Guide. Willingly and cheerfully we acknowledge his authority. Jesus’ authority is absolute. It is unlimited. It knows no bounds.

“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Mt 28:18). Those are the words of the risen Christ. The word “power” in the original actually means authority. All authority has been given to Jesus Christ as a gift from his heavenly Father. It is his by virtue of his undisputed victory over death and the devil. The power of his enemies has been broken. They have suffered a crushing defeat. The spoils of victory belong to Jesus. He now has supreme authority. His authority is plenary. It is ultimate. It is absolute.

Jesus’ authority establishes the canonicity of the Bible. His authority makes these 66 books of the canon authoritative for us. This point is basic in the whole question of the canon. God, not man, has established the canon. What belongs to the canon has been determined by God, not by the church, not by any human authority.

What arrogance the Church of Rome displays when it presumes to claim this authority for itself. According to Catholic teaching, the power and authority to establish the canon lies in its hands. In 1546 the Council of Trent adopted a “Decree concerning the Canonical Scriptures.” In this decree it listed the books of the Apocrypha together with the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments and then declared:

If anyone does not accept as sacred and canonical the aforesaid books in their entirety and with all their parts, as they have been accustomed to be read in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the Old Latin Vulgate Edition, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema.<sup>1</sup>

It is a mark of the Antichrist that he arrogates to himself that which is the sole prerogative of God. He dares to pronounce a curse on those who do not accept his canon. According to Rome, the Scriptures receive their authority from the church. The church decides what is canonical and what is not.

Martin Chemnitz, one of the authors of the Formula of Concord, in his deservedly famous *Examination of the Council of Trent* summarizes the position of Pighius, a Dutch Catholic theologian who took part in the Diet of Worms, in this way:

... the authority of the church is not only not inferior, nor merely equal, but in a certain way even superior to and more excellent than the authority of the Scripture, for it was the church which imparted canonical authority to the chief writings, which they did not possess either of themselves or from their authors.<sup>2</sup>

Modern theologians of liberal persuasion take the same position as Rome on this question. H. F. D. Sparks in his book *The Formation of the New Testament* writes:

The Church produced the New Testament also in the sense that it was the Church that defined authoritatively what books the New Testament should contain, and what books it should not. Today we read II Peter as part of the New Testament and not Barnabas

---

<sup>1</sup> H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Original Text with English Translation* (St Louis and London: B. Herder, 1941), P 18.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent, Part 1*, translated by Fred Kramer (St. Louis and London: Concordia, 1971), p 45.

because the Church has decided we should. . . . Consequently whatever authority attaches to the New Testament is not inherent but rather derived from the Church.<sup>3</sup>

It may surprise us to hear a Protestant making a statement like this, but a little reflection will remind us that Protestant theologians of the liberal school do not regard the Scriptures as God's Word to man. For them they are man's word about God. It is entirely consistent with such a view, therefore, when Wilhelm Schneemelcher, professor of New Testament and early church history at the University of Bonn, writing in the book *The New Testament Apocrypha*, states, "The canon is certainly the work of the church."<sup>4</sup>

Such a claim will evoke a vigorous dissent from all true Lutherans. The canon is not a creation of the church. It is rather God's gift to the church. The church has not produced the Scriptures; the Scriptures have produced the church. The church stands under the Scriptures, not over them. The Scriptures are normative for the church.

Our Lutheran Confessions strongly emphasize this normative authority of the Scriptures. The Epitome of the Formula of Concord clearly states:

We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119,105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:8)

Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apotles was preserved.<sup>5</sup>

The Old and New Testament Scriptures have such normative authority in the Christian church because Christ has given them this authority. They are his Word. He is speaking to us in and through them. His authority stands behind them. Even as we recognize Jesus as our absolute authority in all matters of faith and life, so we will also recognize the Holy Scriptures through which he speaks to us as normative and authoritative. We will not presume to place ourselves over the canon, but under it. As disciples of Jesus we will humbly confess that for us he is the ultimate and absolute authority in establishing the canon.

But perhaps you are saying at this point, "That still does not answer for us the question, How was the canonicity of the Bible established? How do we know which books belong to the Old and New Testament Scriptures? How do we know in which books Christ is speaking to us? How do we know which books have his stamp of approval?" That brings us to the second basic principle involved in establishing the canonicity of the Bible.

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Julian Anderson in "Scripture and Tradition in Relation to the Church!" in *This Steadfast Word*, Carl J. Lawrenz, ed. (Lutheran Free Conference Publications, 1965), p 151.

<sup>4</sup> Edgar hennecke, *The New Testament Apocrypha*, Wilhelm Schnee melcher, ed., translated by R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 1, 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Concordia Triglotta* (St Louis: Concordia, 1921). Ep., Preface, 1, 2, p 777.

*Those books have divine authority and belong to the canon of Holy Scripture which were given by inspiration of God.*

We began our discussion of the previous point by speaking of our Savior and what he means to us. We began with this thought intentionally. Our purpose was to emphasize that our faith in Jesus as our Savior and Redeemer will lead us to accept his authority unconditionally and unquestioningly.

Our faith in Jesus will lead us also to accept the Old and New Testament Scriptures as the inspired Word of God. For us the inspiration of the Bible is an article of faith. We make no apologies for this. We make no attempt to prove it logically or scientifically. Skeptics may accuse us of a logical fallacy when we turn to the Bible to prove the inspiration of the Bible. But no matter! The charge that we are guilty of a circular argument, *a petitio principii*, does not disturb us. How else does one know that an orange is sweet except by tasting the orange? Jesus' sheep hear the voice of their Good Shepherd, and they recognize it. They will not question what he says to them in the Bible about the Bible. We might call our attitude the *a priori* of faith. For us this is a basic presupposition. The skeptic has his presuppositions too. He argues from the *a priori* of unbelief.

Since Jesus is our final authority, his statements regarding the Old Testament settle the question of the Old Testament canon for us. Jesus admonished the Jews, "Search the scriptures!" (Jn 5:39). What a pointless admonition this would have been if there had been any uncertainty in the mind of Jesus or on the part of the Jews as to what those Scriptures were! In John 10:35 we hear him say to the Jews, "The scripture cannot be broken." This passage shows us again that the Scripture was a well-known entity among the Jews.

The Old Testament canon of the Jews consisted of the same 39 books that we have in our Old Testament today. We see this from the way Jesus refers to the Old Testament. In Luke 24:44 he says, "These are the words which I spake unto you while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms concerning me." Jesus is referring here to the three major divisions of the Old Testament. The first of these was called the Law of Moses or the *Torah*. It contained the five books of Moses that comprise the Pentateuch. The second division, called the Prophets (*Nebhiim*), was subdivided into "the former prophets" (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and "the latter prophets" (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and a book containing the 12 minor prophets). The third division consisted of the remaining books, which were simply designated as the Writings (*Kethubhim*). To this third group belonged three poetical books (Psalms, Proverbs, and Job), five rolls (*Megilloth*) (the Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Esther, and Ecclesiastes), and several historical books (Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles).

This threefold division of the Old Testament is known to us also from the Prolog to the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, which dates from about 132 B.C.; from the Talmud, a collection of Jewish laws and traditions, parts of which go back to the time before Christ; and from the writings of Philo and Josephus, Jewish writers who lived shortly after Christ.

At the time of Jesus the third division had apparently not yet received the name "Writings" - at any rate, this term is not used in the New Testament as a title for the *Kethubhim* - but Psalms was the first book in this group and Chronicles the last. We see that Jesus follows the arrangement of the Old Testament books that was customary among the Jews from Luke

11:49-51. There he speaks of the persecution of the prophets reported in the Old Testament from Genesis to Chronicles, from the murder of Abel (G n 4) to the slaying of Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20,21). This arrangement of the books is the one that is followed in the Hebrew Old Testament today also.

Sometimes the Jews referred to the whole Old Testament simply as “Moses and the prophets” or “the law and the prophets.” Jesus follows this twofold division in the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus, Where we hear him say, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them” (Lk 16:29); and again in his Sermon on the Mount, where he says, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets” (Mt 5:17; see also Mt 7:12).

Another way of referring to the Old Testament was by naming the author of a particular book. Thus Jesus cites Moses (Mk 7:10), David (Mt 22:43,44), and Isaiah (Mt 13:14). He also mentions by name the author of the books of Daniel (Mt 24:15) and Jonah (Mt 12:39), books which liberal scholars of today deny were written by these prophets. Jesus does not quote from every book of the Old Testament, but he does quote from all three of the main divisions, showing that he accepted the entire Old Testament as canonical.

But what about the books of the Apocrypha, those books which Rome insists must be accepted as canonical also? They are 11 in number, though several of them are only fragments which are usually attached to a canonical book. It may be of interest to hear their names, especially since we do not generally find them in our English Bibles. They are: Tobit, Judith, Additions to the Book of Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus Sirach, Baruch, The Story of Susanna, The Song of the Three Children, The Story of Bel and the Dragon, and I and II Maccabees. In addition to these, I and II Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh are apocryphal books found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but not accepted by the Council of Trent.

These books were written after the time of Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, who died about 400 B.C. Although they found their way into the Septuagint they were never accepted by the Jews as canonical. Neither are they quoted by any writer of the New Testament. It is interesting to note that *The New American Bible*, the new Catholic translation, in a footnote to the Story of Susanna and Bel and the Dragon frankly admits: “They are excluded from the Jewish canon of Scripture, but the church has always included them among the inspired writings.”<sup>6</sup>

As is well known, Luther included the Apocrypha in his German translation of the Bible, but he introduced them with the comment, “These are books that are not to be considered the same as Holy Scripture, and yet are useful and good to read.”<sup>7</sup>

These books, like the Talmud, which was mentioned above, belong to the traditions of the Jews. In Mark 7-13 Jesus denounces the Pharisees for making the Word of God of none effect through their traditions. They placed their traditions above the Holy Scriptures.

From what has been said it is clear that the canon of the Old Testament was complete and closed long before the Jewish council which was held at Jamnia about 90 A.D., when, according to liberal scholars, the canon of the Old Testament was fixed under the leadership of Johanan ben

---

<sup>6</sup> Catholic Biblical Association of America, *The New American Bible Translated from the Original Languages with Critical Use of All the Ancient Sources* (New York and London: P. J. Kenedy & Sons and Collier. Macmillan Limited, 1970), p 1268.

<sup>7</sup> *Die Bibel oder die ganze heilige Schrift Alten und Neuen Testaments, nach der deutschen Uebersetzung Dr. Martin Luthers* (St Louis: Concordia, n.d.), p 917 (our translation).

Zakkai. We accept the 39 books which belonged to the canon of the Jews because Jesus, our Savior, put his stamp of approval on them. That decides the question of their canonicity for us.

God gave these books of the Old Testament to Israel and entrusted them to the care of his chosen people. Referring to the advantage which the Jews had over the gentiles, Paul writes, "Unto them were committed the oracles of God" (Ro 3:2). He is echoing a thought that appears in Psalm 147:19,20: "He (God) sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation; and as for his judgments, they have not known them."

Moses and the other prophets of the Old Testament wrote at the express command of God (cf, e.g., Ex 17:14; 34:27). When Moses had finished writing the Book of the Law, the Pentateuch, it was put in the side of the ark of the covenant (Dt 31:9,24-27). During the reign of Josiah, the king of Judah from 640 to 609 B.C., the book of the law of Moses was found in the temple (2 Kgs 22:8; 2 Chr 34:14ff). It undoubtedly remained there until the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.

After the death of Moses God told Joshua, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth: but thou shalt meditate therein day and night" (Jos 1:8). To this book the writings of the other prophets were added as God sent them to his people (Jos 24:25f, 1 Sm.10:25). God expected his people to recognize, to receive, and to listen to the prophets he sent to them. He authenticated their message by enabling them to perform miracles (e.g., Ex 4:1-5) and by bringing to pass those things which they had prophesied (Dt 18:20-22). False prophets also appeared, however, and God expected his people to recognize them as deceivers. Some of them might also perform miracles, but they could be recognized as false prophets if their message did not agree with the previously given Word of God. This was the conclusive test. "To the law and to the testimony," Isaiah declared; "if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Is 8:20).

It was Isaiah also who admonished the people, "Seek ye out of the book of the Lord, and read" (Is 34:16). Jeremiah reproved them, "The Lord hath sent unto you all his servants the prophets, rising early and sending them; but ye have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear" (Jr 25:4).

The books of the Old Testament have divine authority and belong to the canon of Holy Scripture because they were given by inspiration of God. Jesus, our Savior, testifies to this fact. Repeatedly he quotes from the Old Testament, introducing the quotation with the familiar words, "It is written" (e.g., Mt 4:4). The written word has authority not merely because it is written, but because it is the Word of God. This was the Sword of the Spirit which Jesus wielded in overcoming the temptations of the devil.

The passage from Deuteronomy 8:3 which Jesus cited in warding off the devil's first temptation is significant: "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). The word spoken by Moses *proceeded out of the mouth of God!* That is why it was able to give and preserve life.

Frequently we hear the prophets underscore their message with the solemn, weighty words, "The mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (Is 1:20; 40:5). "Thus saith the Lord" is their constant refrain (e.g., Am 1:3,6,9,11,13). David, the sweet Psalmist of Israel, tells us that he wrote by inspiration of God: "The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue" (2 Sm 23:2). Jesus substantiates this. In Matthew 22:43,44 he quotes from Psalm 110, a Psalm of David, and testifies that David wrote this "in spirit," that is, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.

We accept the books of the Old Testament as canonical because of the clear testimony of Jesus that they were given by inspiration of God.

We have the testimony of Jesus' apostles also to the inspiration of the Old Testament. Paul reminds Timothy, "From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tm 3:15). The Holy Scriptures can make one wise unto salvation because, as Paul explains, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tm 3:16). "Given by inspiration of God" means that it proceeded from the mouth of God. It means, as David confessed, that the Spirit of the Lord spoke through the holy writers.

We do not pretend to be able to explain the process of inspiration; we simply acknowledge the fact. Peter tells us that "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pe 1:21). It is Peter also who tells us that the prophets diligently studied their own writings, "searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow" (1 Pe 1:11). Inspiration is a divine miracle. It is ill-becoming for men to deny its reality because they can not understand it.

Certainly the canonicity of the 39 books we have in the Old Testament is beyond question. As surely as we are ready to follow the voice of our Good Shepherd, so surely will we accept Jesus' testimony concerning the inspiration of the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings, which comprised the Scriptures recognized and accepted by the Jews. They are the inspired and authoritative Word of God. They are canonical.

But let us turn now to the question of the canon of the New Testament. At first glance our problem may seem to be somewhat more difficult here since the New Testament was written after Jesus ascended into heaven. We cannot therefore look for a statement from him to the effect that the Gospels and Epistles together with the Book of Acts and the Apocalypse are the Word of God. During his days on earth they did not exist as a well-known corpus of writings like the Old Testament Scriptures. Neither do we know of a special revelation or some voice from heaven that gave divine approval to the collections of the 27 books in question.

But our problem is not really so difficult as we might at first imagine. We begin again with the absolute authority of Jesus Christ and with the principle that those books have divine authority and belong to the canon of Holy Scripture which were given by inspiration of God.

Jesus did not, of course, write any books himself. At the very beginning of his public ministry, however, he "ordained twelve, that they should be with him, that he might send them forth to preach" (Mk 3:14). After his resurrection he solemnly commissioned them, saying, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (Jn 20:21). The promise he had given to the 70 disciples he sent out earlier applied in a special sense to his twelve apostles: "He that heareth you, heareth me" (Lk 10:16).

It was Jesus' plan and purpose from the very beginning that his apostles should speak in his name. He authorized and empowered them to speak as his representatives. In his high priestly prayer to his heavenly Father just before his death, he prayed not only for his apostles, but for those also who would believe in him "*through their word*" (Jn 17:20).

Listen to some of the reassuring promises which Jesus gave his apostles on that momentous night: "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you" (Jn 14:16,17). Again, "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost whom the Father will send in my

name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (Jn 14:26). Yet again, “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning” (Jn 15:26).

The Holy Ghost would equip them for their work as Jesus’ witnesses: “It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. . . When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself, but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you” (Jn 16:6,13-15).

How remarkably Jesus fulfilled these broad, significant promises! On the day of Pentecost he poured out his Spirit on his disciples. Inspired, emboldened, and equipped by the Spirit with all the requisite talents and abilities, they preached, they testified, and they bore witness to Christ in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

The Spirit guided and governed them both in their preaching and in their writing. That there is no essential difference between the spoken and the written word of the apostles is evident from Paul’s admonition in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “Stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.”

The effectual promises of Jesus are the basis for our assurance of the inspiration of the writings of his apostles. The authors of the New Testament remind us frequently that they are writing under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. To the Corinthians Paul writes, “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth: comparing spiritual things with spiritual,” that is, expressing spiritual truths in appropriate spiritual words (1 Cor 2:13). Later, in this same epistle, he says, “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:37).

Paul and the other New Testament writers were well aware of the fact that what they were writing was Holy Scripture, on a level with the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul’s remark to Timothy that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God” is not to be restricted, therefore, to the Old Testament. “All scripture” is a comprehensive term. It covers both the Old Testament and the New.

The Apostle John adds a noteworthy reminder to his Gospel: “This is the disciple which testified of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true” (Jn 21:24). Because he is writing as an apostle of Jesus Christ, John’s words bear the impress of the authority of Christ himself. For that reason they are to be believed. John tells us that he has recorded the signs which Jesus did in the presence of his disciples “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (Jn 20:31).

In his first epistle John similarly insists that he is transmitting a message which he has received from Jesus Christ: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (for the life was manifested, and we have seen it and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is

with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you” (1 Jn 1:1-5).

John’s Apocalypse, too, was written at the express command of the Lord Jesus Christ. John writes: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave unto him to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ and of all things that he saw” (Re 1:1,2). Twice in this first chapter Jesus gives John the commission, “What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia.... Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter” (Re 1:11,19).

The seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor all have the solemn attestation that they are messages from the Spirit addressed to these congregations: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (Re 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). Finally, in the closing chapter of his book John returns to the thought that this is a revelation from Jesus Christ: “He said unto me, ‘These sayings are faithful and true; and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done. Behold I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.’ And I John saw these things, and heard them” (Re 22:6-8). Then Jesus himself speaks and says, “I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches” (Re 22:16). He pronounces an awesome curse on any one who may presume to add or to subtract from the words of the prophecy of this book (Re 22:18,19).

Peter likewise asserts that he and his fellow apostles “have preached the gospel ... with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven” (I Pe 1:12). He places on a par “the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets” and “the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Savior” (2 Pe 3:2).

The canonicity of a New Testament writing is directly related to its apostolicity, just as the canonicity of the Old Testament Scriptures was a direct consequence of their propheticity. The apostles, like the prophets, spoke and wrote by divine inspiration. For that reason the church is said to be “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (Eph 2:20). Having been given by inspiration of God, the writings of the apostles and prophets are canonical.

In his *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* Adolf Hoenecke links canonicity with inspiration when he writes, “Only that Scripture can be canonical, a norm for faith and life, which has actually been given by God, namely, the inspired Scriptures.”<sup>8</sup>

J. L. Packer, a conservative Anglican, similarly points out that canonicity is a consequence of inspiration. He remarks:

The Church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by his work of creation, and similarly he gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909), 1,441.

<sup>9</sup> J. L. Packer, *God Speaks to Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p 81 J. L. Packer, *God Speaks to Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p 81.

The books that have been inspired by God are *ipso facto* canonical, and any writings not inspired by God are self-evidently non-canonical.

Because of the authority conferred by Christ on his apostles, Paul almost invariably mentions his apostolic office in the greetings with which he begins his epistles. “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle,” the identification introducing the Epistle to the Romans (Ro 1:1), is typical. As the writing of an apostle, Paul’s words are divinely inspired and carry divine authority.

Though Paul was not one of the original twelve apostles, he is emphatic in asserting his apostolic office (Ro 11:13; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8,9; Ga 1:1). He did not receive his gospel from any man; he received it directly “by revelation of Jesus Christ” (Ga 1:12; cf also I Cor 1:23).

The writings of the apostles were received by the Christians to whom they were addressed as authoritative. Paul gives thanks to God for the Thessalonians, of whom he says, “When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God” (1 Th 2:13).

The apostles functioned as Christ’s agents or spokesmen in bringing the message of salvation to the world. The Epistle to the Hebrews begins with the significant statement, “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son” (He 1:1,2). It pleased the Son, as we have heard, to authorize his apostles to speak for him. He then authenticated and verified their message, as Hebrews 2:4 tells us, “God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost according to his own will.”

As the inspired and authoritative Word of Christ, the apostolic writings were read by their recipients in their services. Paul instructs the Thessalonians, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren” (1 Th 5:27). The New Testament Scriptures were to be read in public worship just as the Old Testament Scriptures were read. Paul directs the Colossians not only to read the epistle he is sending to them, but also to share it with the neighboring congregation at Laodicea: “And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea” (Col 4:16). The reference to the epistle from Laodicea was, of course, clear to the Colossians, but it is no longer clear to us. Some think that it refers to a letter of Paul’s which has not been preserved. Others are of the opinion that it is a reference either to Ephesians or to Philemon, letters addressed to Christians who lived in the same province of Asia. One fact is obvious, however, and that is that an exchange of apostolic letters was to take place among the congregations.

Evidence that a collection of apostolic writings was being made in the days of the apostles themselves is to be found in the statement of Peter: “Even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction” (2 Pe 3:15,16). This passage makes it clear that all of Paul’s epistles were known to Peter and to Peter’s readers. It tells us also that Paul’s epistles were to be equated with “the other scriptures.”

Here we see from the New Testament itself how the New Testament canon was established. The apostles themselves were active in supervising the collecting and preserving of the inspired books. They did this under the guidance and at the direction of the Holy Ghost.

The hand of God is apparent in other respects also in this process. Chemnitz cites a story that goes back to Tertullian, who was born in 150 A.D. This story tells how St John exposed a spurious writing that was being circulated as Paul's. Then Chemnitz makes the observation: "To John God granted a longer life after the death of the other apostles in order that apostolic watchfulness might look out for the church of all posterity, lest counterfeit writings might be foisted on the churches under the name of the apostles."<sup>10</sup>

John lived until the end of the first century. For many years he worked in Ephesus, a prominent and influential center of the Christian church. With the writing of his Apocalypse the New Testament canon was closed. It was during the lifetime of the apostles themselves, therefore, that the books of the New Testament were written, collected, and distributed. The apostles took a personal hand in inaugurating, directing, and supervising this important work.

This answers for us also the question concerning the apostolicity of certain books that were not written by the apostles. The Gospels of Mark and Luke fall into this category. Because of Mark's close association with Peter and because of Luke's association with Paul there never was any question about the divine inspiration of their Gospels. They had the stamp and seal of apostolic approval. Augustine says, "They wrote at a time in which they earned the approval not only of the church of Christ but also of the apostles themselves who were still living."<sup>11</sup>

There is some uncertainty about the identity of the authors of the Epistles of James and Jude. The Epistle to the Hebrews is anonymous. We recall, however, that there are also some books of the Old Testament whose authors are unknown to us. These epistles are quoted in the Apostolic Fathers, the earliest Christian writings that we have except for the New Testament itself. These writings date from the end of the first century to about the middle of the second. They quote James and Jude and Hebrews in the same manner as they quote other New Testament books. It is clear, therefore, that these books, too, originated in the apostolic circle in the apostolic age and represent apostolic preaching.

It is evident then also that apostolicity is not limited to those writings that were personally written by one or the other of the apostles. Apostolicity refers rather to that which was apostolic teaching and had apostolic approval.

From the New Testament we see that spurious writings purporting to be apostolic appeared even in the apostolic age. Paul warns the Thessalonian Christians not to be troubled "neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand" (2 Th 2:2). He certifies the authenticity of his letters by his personal signature. In I Corinthians 16:21 we read, "The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write." (See also Col 4:18.) The epistle to the Galatians was evidently written by Paul without the help of a secretary, for he says, "Ye see how large a letter" (or, rather, with what large letters) "I have written unto you with mine own hand" (Ga 6:11).

In the post-apostolic period spurious and non-apostolic writings multiplied fast and furiously. Some of the non-apostolic books such as the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas were read and regarded in certain churches as canonical. On the other hand, the apostolicity of a few canonical books came under question. It should be emphasized, however, that the authority of the greater number of New Testament writings was never questioned within the church. They are quoted as Scripture in the Apostolic Fathers. Even the Epistle to the Hebrews, the canonicity of which was later questioned in the West was used by Clement of Rome,

---

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., p 178.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

who wrote about 90 to 100 A.D., and by Tertullian, one of the great teachers of the church, who wrote in Latin and who lived about 150 to 220 A.D. A document discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt about 1945 called "The Gospel of Truth," which is dated about 140-150 A.D. by scholars, shows that at that time "the people in Rome knew a collection of authoritative writings which were practically identical with the NT."<sup>12</sup>

About the year 150 a heretic by the name of Marcion, who gained a following in Rome, denied the authority of the generally accepted canon. He recognized only ten of Paul's epistles and a mutilated Gospel of Luke as canonical. Because of the use which another heretical sect the Montanists, made of certain passages in Hebrews and the Book of Revelation, these books came under fire. The church found it necessary to take a stand against the Marcionites, the Montanists, the Gnostics, and other heretical sects that appeared. This meant that it was forced to consider the question of the canonicity of the New Testament Scriptures that were in current use but were being attacked.

This process of investigation continued for some two hundred years. In the early part of the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea, who took part in the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.), wrote a history of the Christian church. In this history he discusses the canon. Eusebius makes a distinction between books that were universally accepted (homologoumena), books whose authority was contested or disputed (antilegomena), and a third group consisting of wholly spurious books. With respect to the antilegomena, Eusebius tells us: "Those that are disputed, yet familiar to most include the epistles known as James, Jude, and 2 Peter, and those called 2 and 3 John."<sup>13</sup> He places the Revelation of St. John among the spurious books with the remark, "If this seems the right place for it: as I said before, some reject it, others include it among the Recognized Books."<sup>14</sup> He considers Hebrews to have been written by Paul, but adds, "We must not shut our eyes to the fact that some authorities have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, pointing out that the Roman Church denies that it is the work of Paul."<sup>15</sup>

In an Easter letter addressed to the Christians in Egypt in 367, Athanasius, the great champion of orthodoxy, listed the 27 books we have in our New Testament as canonical and distinguished them from both the Old and New Testament Apocrypha. He made no distinction between the homologoumena and antilegomena. The Third Council of Carthage in 397, in which Augustine exercised a strong influence, recognized these same 27 books. Thus by 400 A.D. the debate concerning the canon was concluded in the West. In the East the discussion continued for another hundred years, but for all practical purposes the issue was settled around the year 500 when all of the antilegomena were included in the Peshitta, the Syriac Bible, by Philoxenus.

In considering the church's discussion and debate during these centuries it is important to recognize what the church was doing. It was not constructing the New Testament. It was not creating the canon. Rather, in response to the challenge of heretics like Marcion it was defining more and more clearly the reasons why it accepted as canonical the apostolic writings which it had acknowledged and had used as authoritative for many, many years. That there was some uncertainty and confusion for a time about a few of the New Testament books is not surprising.

---

<sup>12</sup> W. C. van Unnik, quoted in H. N. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius, *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated by G. A. Williamson (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965), Bk. III, 25, p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Bk. III, 2, p. 108.

The amazing thing is that with regard to the vast majority of the books there was no debate at all. From the very beginning and all through the years there was a remarkable consensus concerning their apostolicity and inspiration, and therefore concerning their canonicity.

It is well known that Luther entertained some reservations about the canonicity of some of the antilegomena. He grouped Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation together at the end of his New Testament with the comment, "Up to this point we have had the true and certain chief books of the New Testament. The four which follow have from ancient times had a different reputation."<sup>16</sup>

Luther's comments regarding James have often been quoted. In his Preface to the New Testament he wrote, "St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it."<sup>17</sup> In his Preface to the epistle itself he makes the further comment, "Though this epistle of St. James was rejected by the ancients, I praise it and consider it a good book, because it sets up no doctrine of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God. However, to state my own opinion about it though without prejudice to anyone, I do not regard it as the writing of an apostle."<sup>18</sup>

Luther's reasons are, first, that he believes it contradicts Paul and teaches justification by works, and secondly, that it does not mention the passion, resurrection, or Spirit of Christ. He says, "All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate (treiben) Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ."<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Luther concluded that James "wanted to guard against those who relied on faith without works, but was unequal to the task. He tried to accomplish by harping on the law what the apostles accomplish by stimulating people to love. Therefore I cannot include him among the chief books, though I would not thereby prevent anyone from including or extolling him as he pleases, for there are otherwise many good sayings in him."<sup>20</sup>

With all due respect for Luther as an interpreter of the Scriptures, we will have to say that Luther did not understand the Epistle of James. Careful study will show that James does not contradict Paul. The whole epistle is, in fact, an exposition of the truth which Paul treats in Romans 6, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Ro 6:1,2.)

Concerning the Book of Revelation Luther commented in 1522 that he considered it "neither apostolic nor prophetic."<sup>21</sup> He did not think that it taught Christ. "I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely," he declared.<sup>22</sup> Later Luther came to regard Revelation as more profitable, still doubting, however, that it was the work of St. John the Apostle. Nevertheless, he stated, "By that, however, no one should be prevented from regarding this as the work of St. John the Apostle, or of whomever else he chooses."<sup>23</sup>

Luther knew that the canonicity of these books had been contested in some quarters of the early church. This was a historical fact that could not be denied. He was familiar with Eusebius.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955), Vol. 35, p 394.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 362.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p 395f.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p 396.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400.

He was undoubtedly influenced also by Erasmus, who published an edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, which Luther used. In his *Annotaciones* to his Greek text, Erasmus was critical of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. Historical evidence that has come to light since Luther's time has shown beyond all doubt, however, that in the early post-apostolic period the antilegomena were accepted by the church without question as belonging to Scripture.

It has sometimes been said that Luther accepted only "a canon within a canon." In a certain sense this is true. But it is not true that Luther had reservations about the rest of the books of the Bible. For Luther they were the Word of God. Liberal scholars have claimed that Luther considered only those parts that spoke of Christ to be the Word of God in the 62 books whose canonicity was undisputed. They cite his remark, "Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St Paul does the teaching."<sup>24</sup> But they are twisting his words. Luther obviously is reflecting Paul's thought in Galatians 1:8, "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." For Luther every word written in the 62 books he recognized as canonical was binding. For him it was the verbally inspired Word of God.

Luther's attitude toward the antilegomena was also that of Chemnitz and other early orthodox theologians of our Lutheran Church. Chemnitz in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* refers to the distinction which Eusebius made and then asks, "Can the present church make those writings concerning which the most ancient church had doubts because of the contradiction of some, because the witness of the primitive church concerning them did not agree - can the present church, I ask, make those writings canonical, catholic, and equal to those which are of the first class?"<sup>25</sup>

Then Chemnitz continues:

This whole matter, as we have said, depends on sure attestations of that church which was at the time of the apostles, which witness the immediately following church accepted and preserved in historical works which are sure and worthy of credence. Where therefore reliable testimonies of the primitive and most ancient church cannot be produced from the testimonies of ancient men who lived not long after the times of the apostles that the books concerning which there is controversy were without contradiction and doubt received by and commended to the church as legitimate and reliable, any and all human decrees are of no avail.<sup>26</sup>

This does not mean for Chemnitz, however, that these books should simply be rejected and condemned. They are to be read for the edification of the people. But they were not to be used to establish articles of faith.

No dogma ought therefore to be drawn out of these books which does not have reliable and clear foundations and testimonies in other canonical books. What is said in these books must be explained and understood according to the analogy of those things which were clearly taught in the canonical books. There is no doubt that this is the opinion of antiquity.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Other teachers of our church such as Gerhard, Calov, and Quenstedt considered the antilegomena to be canonical books, but of the second rank. Baier concedes that the ancient church had doubts about these books, but says that today there is no longer any doubt. Hoenecke states that this is the position of the entire Lutheran Church today.<sup>28</sup>

Thanks to the discovery of certain ancient documents and the careful research of scholars, we do indeed have a better picture today of the early church, including the post-apostolic age, the second century, than students of church history had in Luther's time. But are we dependent on history for our conviction that the 66 books we have in our Bible actually belong there? Is the canonicity of the various books of the Bible finally dependent after all on the opinions of men and decisions of church councils? Is the historical judgment of the church the final basis for the acceptance of the New Testament as canonical? Is the faith of the church based on the results of historical investigation? Certainly not!

The testimony of the ancient church is the basis for a measure of human assurance concerning the canon, but the ultimate and decisive basis for our firm conviction that in the 66 books of the Old and New Testament Scriptures we have the inspired and authoritative Word of God is the testimony of the Holy Ghost through the Holy Scriptures themselves. This brings us to our third and final principle in establishing the canonicity of the Bible.

*The canonical books have authenticated and validated themselves as the inspired and authoritative Word of God.*

God's Word is a dynamic power. It is active and potent "Is not my word like as a fire," the Lord asks through the prophet Jeremiah, "and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jr 23:29). God himself works in and through his Word. The Scriptures are no dead letter. They are living and life-giving. They pulse with the power of the Holy Spirit, who has given them, is in them, and speaks through them. They are the tool he uses to kindle the flame of faith in hearts that are cold and dead.

Just as Jesus' omnipotent and life-giving Word enabled Lazarus to come forth from a grave in which he had been buried for four days, so the Scriptures are a life-imparting, faith-creating power. "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life," Jesus says (Jn 6:63). Where his Word is, there his Spirit is; and where his Spirit is there is life. Jesus' mighty Word produces a new spirit; it creates new life.

Down through the ages the books that we have in our Bible have proved themselves to be spirit and life. Again and again as men have read them, they have heard the Savior himself speaking to them through them. They have experienced what the two Emmaus disciples felt when they recalled the conversation they had had with Jesus along the way: "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk 24:32).

The Epistle to the Hebrews points up this dynamic quality of the Scriptures when it says, "The Word of God is quick [that is, alive] and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart' (he 4:12).

---

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, 1. 443.

In his high priestly prayer Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth” (Jn 17:17). As God’s truth, the Scriptures authenticate themselves. They need no endorsement by men, no approval by church councils, no majority vote by any human court. Their authority is self-established. They are what they are because God has spoken and is speaking through them. Man listens to them and recognizes the voice of God.

These books have what our fathers called the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. They are the voice of him who is the ultimate and absolute authority. There is none higher. There is, therefore, apart from God, no one who can authenticate or validate them. They are self-authenticating, self-validating. They carry in themselves the testimony as to what they are. That testimony is confirmed by certification on the part of no outside authority. The teachers of our church have coined the term *autopisticity* to designate this quality of the Scriptures.

It was this characteristic of autopisticity that our Synod highlighted when it adopted its “Statement on Scripture” in 1959:

Scripture being the Word of God, it carries its own authority in itself and does not receive it by the approbation of the Church. The Canon, that is, that collection of books which is the authority for the Church is not the creation of the Church. Rather, the Canon has, by a quiet historical process which took place in the worship life of the Church, imposed itself upon the Church by virtue of its own divine authority.<sup>29</sup>

It was the autopisticity of the Scriptures that caused the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments to be separated from the Apocrypha and other non-canonical writings. Just as in a blast furnace the heavier molten iron separates itself from the lighter slag, so the inspired Scriptures separated themselves from the non-inspired writings.

When Jesus preached, the people listened with astonishment. “For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mt 7:29). They recognized that his words carried authority. This authority was inherent in them by virtue of what they were.

So it is also with Jesus’ written Word. No man can give divine authority to a writing like the Shepherd of Hermas, which does not possess that authority in itself. Neither can any man take away the divine authority of a book which is actually the Word of God. Men may deny that it has that authority, but it has it nonetheless.

Jesus received his authority from his heavenly Father. “My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me,” he declared (Jn 7:16). The divine authority of his teaching was recognized by all who did not maliciously and stubbornly close their hearts to his Word. “If any man will do his [i.e., the Father’s] will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (Jn 7:17). In the same way the inspired Scriptures have proved themselves to be of God, and God’s people have heard and recognized the voice of their heavenly Father in them.

Paul was thoroughly acquainted with human philosophy and the whole spectrum of man’s religious speculations. But Paul was determined not to know anything in his preaching save Jesus Christ, and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). The gospel, to the ministry of which Paul dedicated his life, continually proved itself to be “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Ro 1:16).

---

<sup>29</sup> *Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Convention*, The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, 1959, p 199.

Similarly, through the centuries the canonical Scriptures have demonstrated their inherent power. Jesus urges us to cling to his Word. "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jn 8:31,32). That Word is not some nebulous, elusive, unknown quantity. Jesus did not bid us to continue in it and hold fast to it and then leave us in the dark as to what it is and where we can find it he has given it to us in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Through those Scriptures despairing and dying sinners have come to know the blessed truth of their redemption and justification, and through that truth they have been made free, eternally free from the cruel bondage of sin and Satan.

The saving truth revealed in the Scriptures has brought righteousness, peace, and joy to you and me. We have now been entrusted with its preservation and propagation. "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully" was the Lord's solemn charge to his people through the prophet Jeremiah (Jr 23:28). Now we have his Word, and with it we have a twofold responsibility - the responsibility, first of all, to speak that Word, but the responsibility also to speak it faithfully.

It would be criminal negligence on our part to shirk the obligation to share the Word of Life with those who have not yet heard it. It would be equally reprehensible for us to fail to transmit it just as we have received it in the canonical Scriptures. "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" is Peter's earnest admonition (1 Pe 4:11). As the oracles of God were committed to Israel in days of old, so they have now been entrusted to us, Christ's New Testament church. What a joy and privilege is ours! Those oracles of God are clear. Those oracles of God are authoritative. Those oracles of God are words of eternal life. God make us responsible and faithful stewards of them!