

A CRITIQUE OF DR SP HEBART'S

THEOLOGY OF THE WORD LECTURE II

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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(Note: as with the critique on Lecture I so this also assumes that Dr Hebart's lecture will be in hand in its original form so that the context of quoted statements can be checked. Points discussed shall be in the order of their occurrence.)

Introduction

One is very reluctant to embark upon any criticism of this lecture above all because to me it appears so thoroughly confused and confusing that one is constantly forced to ask himself, in the reading of this paper; what does the writer mean? And even; is the writer clear in his own mind what he means? At the close of the oral presentation of this particular lecture at Coolum Dr Hebart stated to the writer of this critique: "The trouble with you is that you think logically while I think dialectically". I would agree with that, though, of course, I would hold that the *trouble* is not in logical thinking but in the lack of it that is so evident in these papers. I have to proceed, therefore, using logical thinking, the only kind of thinking that I possess, (I am not sure that there is such a thing as dialectical thinking) and if that is a disadvantage which prevents me from appreciating the profound insights of Dr Hebart's lectures, I beg his pardon and trust that he, in some dialectical way, will forgive me.

POINTS FROM LECTURE II

1. *The New Testament Canon Establishes the OT Canon* Lecture II, page 1, paragraph 2

Dr Hebart states: "We are primarily dealing with the NT, because once its canonical status is established we can accord the same status to the OT, since the two testaments are essentially bound together".

Perhaps that approach is alright for us today to establish *our certainty* in acceptance of the OT Canon. But that approach cannot *establish* the *canonicity* of the OT itself, since it was obviously canonical before the NT was written.

But for anyone who, with Dr Hebart, wishes to make the Christ-content of a writing the ultimate test of canonicity there is virtually no other approach possible. He has to wait for the coming of Christ, to see what it was like, before being able to determine what thrust there is towards Christ in the OT books. With the principle there can be no canonicity of the OT before the NT. Surely this failing in itself must show this approach to be inadequate.

2. *Apostolic Authority and/or Historical Closeness* Lecture II, page 2, paragraph 1

[Dr] Hebart states: "The apostolic witness to Jesus and his gospel is source and norm for the message of the Church."

I was happy with that statement as with many others in that paragraph until it was further expounded at the end of the paragraph: "... yet it has special status because it is the original, the first oral word, upon which all further word of the Church depends. *This special status* is therefore one of the *historical closeness*, of immediacy to the very source itself, Jesus."

Sure, historical closeness has its place. But Pilate and Caiaphas were also historically very close to Jesus. What they wrote and said about Jesus is not given canonicity because of their historical closeness, however.

It comes as a severe shock to one's confidence to see that any teacher in the LCA can write on the subject of the canonicity of the New Testament ignoring the central issue of our Lord's own AUTHORISATION (not historical closeness) of His apostles to be His witnesses and to speak for Him. Apostolicity, as a criterion of canonicity, is NOT merely one of "historical closeness, of immediacy to the very source ..." but it is a criterion of divine authority, the transmission, through His apostles of the very words of our Lord Himself. How is it that all the usual Scripture passages are overlooked or ignored in this connection as if they did not exist? Ephesians 2:20. "... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone;" Christ speaking in and through His apostles: John 14:26 "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." John 15:20. "Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me they will persecute you; if they have kept my saying they will keep yours also." John 20:21 "As my Father hath sent me even so send I you." Galatians 1:1 "Paul an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father who raised him from the dead." See also Ephesians 1:1, 1 Timothy 1:1, etc. Acts 1:22-25, etc.

To miss the point of the apostolic AUTHORITY in the New Testament as our Lord's own authorisation is to miss the chief point which makes the NT Scriptures essentially different from all other writings. That is why the Doctrinal Statement of our Church on Genesis 1-3 after listing various false approaches to Scripture says: "Such assumptions as these constitute an attack not only on the apostolicity of the Church (Ephesians 2:20), but on the very Lordship of Christ. For this reason we reject them unconditionally." (Doctrinal Statements B2)

3. *The NT Writings not Originally Intended for Preservation* Lecture II, page 3, paragraph 1

Dr Hebart says of many NT writings: "They were not originally intended for preservation or tradition."

That may be true as far as it goes from the human writer's point of view only. However from the divine author's point of view they were originally intended for preservation, and surely, in a discussion of the canon that is an important point. It is precisely because they were originally intended for preservation by their divine author that they forced their acceptance into the canon.

4. *Luther Not Happy that the Gospel Ended Up in Written Form* Lecture II, page 3, paragraph 3

Dr Hebart says: "Luther, as is well known, was not so happy about the fact that the gospel ended up in written form."

No quotations of Luther to support this contention are given, just the rider "as is well known" to make one feel ignorant if he does not agree. I not only acknowledge my ignorance of such a position of Luther (I am happy to call the bluff about the Emperor's new clothes), but I express my refusal to believe the kind of position that Dr Hebart attributes to Luther here in view of his most fundamental principle, the SOLA SCRIPTURA, and his rigid insistence upon the letter of the written word of the Gospel, (for example: "this is my body"), against the papists and enthusiasts.

We sense a hidden jibe in the final sentence of this paragraph which appears to be saying that it is a Reformed rather than a Lutheran conception of the Bible to want to have God's Word IN WRITING, as if that makes it immediately "legalistic". God in His wisdom gave us His Word in writing. "We teach that the Holy Scripture is the Word of God in writing." (Theses VII,2.) We are not ashamed or embarrassed, but rather very thankful for this.

5. *Interpretation is Creative* Lecture II, page 3, paragraph 4

"Interpretation is not merely reproduction, it is creative." Says Dr Hebart.

While we agree with what Dr Hebart has to say further down in this paragraph this is a very strange sentence. We would have thought that insofar as any interpretation of a passage of Scripture is creative, injecting one's own ideas into the passage, it is NOT interpretation, NOT exegesis but eisegesis (reading things into the text) and is therefore to be rejected.

6. *In Interpreting Scripture the Church Hears Its Own Voice* Lecture II, page 3, paragraph 4

We agree that it is a constant danger in interpretation of Scripture that “instead of the Church hearing the message of the canon, it actually hears its own voice.”

While Dr Hebart again lists an example of this his pet enemies of Lutheran Orthodoxy, we think that a very much more recent example could be given.

7. *Wrong Developments and Aberrations in Theology are a Passing Phenomenon* Lecture II, page 4, paragraph 2

“The history of the Church has shown that wrong developments and aberrations in the theology of the Church are a passing phenomenon and that ultimately the Word of God has asserted itself.”

This appears to be a very utopian – millennialistic conception that errors pass away and truth wins out “in the theology of the church” here in history.

8. *Creeds are Tradition* Lecture II, page 4, paragraph 3

“All denominations have tradition, eg, in creed or confessional formulations.”

This is a confusing relativisation of creeds when they are labelled “tradition” as that word is usually understood among us. Is the Nicene Creed merely “tradition”? Are the Lutheran Confessions merely “tradition”? The Lutheran Church has not insisted in unity of traditions but it does demand unity of creed.

9. *‘Apostolic’ Refers to the Content* Lecture II, page 4, paragraph 5

The definition of the canon of the New Testament on the last paragraph of page 4 sounds quite acceptable until Dr Hebart defines his use of the term ‘apostolic’. He says: “‘Apostolic’ refers to the content of that witness, that is Jesus Christ.”

We would understand ‘apostolic’ in the sense of “apostolic authority” based upon our Lord Jesus Christ’s authorisation. That is something different from just content. Of course it will be true that where there is apostolicity in the sense of our Lord’s authorisation there will also be Christo-centricity. But let us not confuse the one with the other. Beginning with this confusion Dr Hebart then goes on to make content the prime criterion of canonicity. He says: “... it is the content which determines canonicity.” (II, p.5, par.1) And yet two paragraphs further on in the middle of page 5 Dr Hebart’s use of the term “apostolic” seems to centre more upon the person or authority of the apostles than content of their writings. We can agree with Dr Hebart again there. It is the repeated changing of meanings of words like this which makes it very difficult to understand what is meant, or if any precise meaning is intended.

10. *2 Peter is Post-apostolic* Lecture II, page 5, paragraph 4

Dr Hebart accepts the critical view that the book of 2 Peter was written in the second century long after the death of Peter the apostle. And yet he accepts this book as belonging to the canon of Scripture quite unambiguously (c.f. bottom of p.3, Lecture I). This means that when the writer of 2 Peter calls himself: “Simon Peter a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ: Chapter 1, v.1, and when he says: “This second epistle ... I now write unto you” ch. 3, v.1, and when he claims to have heard the voice from heaven: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Ch. 1, v.17-18, spoken by the Father to them on the mount of transfiguration, in all of these passages the author of this epistle is claiming to be someone who he is not. If the writer of 2 Peter is not Simon Peter he is a liar. For a theologian to hold such a position and yet to insist that 2 Peter belongs in the canon, the Holy Spirit’s book, brings him into conflict again with the officially adopted position of our church which declares that it is “contrary to the sound doctrine of the Scriptures and of the Theses of Agreement ... 2. to hold that what according to clear biblical statements ‘actually is or actually happened’ may be regarded as what actually is *not* or actually did *not* happen;” (Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy 1972 Statement B1)

It would seem to be very clear that if Dr Hebart would wish to submit to the Church's official position he must either reject 2 Peter from the canon of Scripture, or else he must grant that the writer of 2 Peter was in fact Simon Peter the apostle as he claims. If Dr Hebart maintains that 2 Peter was post-apostolic and yet canonical he undermines the doctrine of Scripture as we confess it. The early church accepted 2 Peter into the canon on the understanding that it was written by Peter the Apostle.

11. *The Anti-legomena* (the books not immediately received into the Canon) Lecture II, page 6, paragraph 3

The task of criticism of these lectures is made very difficult by the strange inconsistencies (are they the manifestations of dialectic thinking) which appear also in the matter of the antilegomena. At the bottom of the third paragraph on page 6 Dr Hebart once more points to his favourite whipping boys, the theologians of Lutheran Orthodoxy, exposing them for not following Luther in allowing the question of the antilegomena to remain open: "By the time we get to Quenstedt and Hollaz the problem of the antilegomena is set aside, and the writings are accorded equal canonical authority." And yet he himself had spoken in much the same way in Lecture I, bottom of page 3 saying: "... but what of ... 2 and 3 John, or of the book of Jude or of 2 Peter in the NT. Our answer to these problems can and must be quite unambiguous: these canonical passages and writings are part of the Holy Spirit's book, the Bible, even though the thrust towards Christ ... may appear to be absent." Has Dr Hebart now succumbed to the dreaded infection of Lutheran Orthodoxy? What are we to believe? What is his position?

12. *The More Christ is Proclaimed, the Greater is the Authority of a Writing* Lecture II, page 6, paragraph 4

On the face of it the Book of Revelation proclaims Christ with great power. How come that it is among the antilegomena if Dr Hebart's criterion is as decisive as he suggests. But then again on page 7, paragraph 2 the see-saw has tipped for we read: "the inclusion of writings in the canon was above all a historical matter: are they apostolic or not? Only afterwards do we get a theological evaluation." And the see-saw tips again the other way in Lecture III where he says: "The authority of the NT is the Gospel." Page 1, paragraph 4. We would have thought that canonicity gives authority, but apparently not. We frankly admit to experiencing some difficulty in following the balls that Dr Hebart is juggling in his dialectical exercises here.

13. *Propositional View of the Bible Shattered by the Edge of the Canon* Lecture II, page 7, paragraph 2

We agree with Dr Hebart: "the question of the authority of Scripture is not affected by the uncertainty on the edge of the canon." While we are not clear on what Dr Hebart means by "a propositional view of the Bible", yet we feel that this intended to apply to us because we certainly do believe that the Bible contains truth in propositional statements. And yet our view of the Bible is certainly not shattered by the problem of the antilegomena at the edge of the canon. It makes perfect sense.

14. *The Evangelical Freedom of the Authority of Scripture* Lecture II, page 7, paragraph 2 end

Speaking of the uncertainty on the edge of the canon and how it shatters a propositional view of the Bible Dr Hebart says: "This means that at this point the evangelical freedom of the authority of Scripture is preserved."

We are mystified by this dialectical rhetoric. The only meaning that we can extract from this is that somehow uncertainty in the authority of Scripture preserves evangelical freedom. This sounds close to the confused nonsense that whatever is vague and unclear is evangelical and whatever is clear and precise is legalistic. Surely Dr Hebart does not mean that.

15. *Theological Contradictions in the Antilegomena* Lecture II, page 7 bottom to page 8

While the terms theological contradictions and error are not used here Dr Hebart says: "Hebrews denies the possibility of a second repentance; Jude has a different concept of faith; Revelation expects a messianic millennium; 2 Peter has a hellenistic teaching on salvation and sets aside the eschatological concept of the *parousia*. However this does not invalidate their canonical status."

We cannot accept Dr Hebart's charges against these Books. If he seriously believes that Hebrews denies the possibility of a second repentance, and if he believes that the rest of Scripture allows for a second repentance, how can he escape the conclusion that there is a theological contradiction and error here? And this is not a peripheral matter but is intimately bound up with the Gospel. Our Statements on The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy state that we "understand inerrancy in the normal sense of freedom from all error and contradiction 'factual' as well as 'theological'. (Doctrinal Statements B1.par.1.) We can only conclude that if Dr Hebart sincerely believes what he seems to be saying here he is opposed to the declared position of our church.

We do not accept the suggestion that Revelation expects a messianic millennium. We understand that it was precisely that distortion of the meaning of this book that kept it from being recognised much earlier as canonical scripture. We would see Dr Hebart's statements in this paragraph as being a fine example of "creative interpretation". [See 9??] If we allow Scripture alone to interpret Scripture these problems will vanish.

16. *The Borderline of the Canon Runs Through Its Very Middle* Lecture II, page 8, paragraph 1 end

Dr Hebart says: "All this is an indication that the borderline of the canon runs through its very middle."

This is perhaps the most tragic statement in this whole lecture. If it means anything at all it means that there is no authoritative canon at all. Is this the "evangelical freedom of the authority of Scripture" to which we were introduced on the previous page which is preserved by uncertainty at the edge of the canon and now is still further promoted and increased by no authoritative canon at all.

Dr Hebart is quite happy with his statement "the borderline of the canon runs right through its very middle" because he repeats it again at the bottom of this page. This shows that he regards it as a very important statement of his position. If we have misunderstood Dr Hebart's meaning we apologise, but we can understand by it only that Scripture as canonical Scripture (the "book") has no authority at all. This repudiation of an authoritative canon fits the nihilism of Lecture III and prepares the way for the position that the Gospel is the sole source of authority in the Scriptures.

We see this as a radical affront to and rejection of the position of our church as expounded in the Theses of Agreement, which always emphasise the canonical Scriptures – not the Gospel – as the only authoritative norm and standard [words cut off from bottom of page]

"We solemnly reaffirm the Scriptural principle of Luther and the Lutheran Church that 'the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel' (Smalc Art.Pars II,ii,15; Trig.p467) and declare with the Formula of Concord: '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 New Testaments alone' (Epit.,dc compend.regula 1.Trigl.p777). We therefore accept the Scriptures, ie, the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the only source and ultimate judge, rule and standard of all doctrine of the Church, also in the doctrines on the Holy Scriptures and on Inspiration. In doing so we reject all attempts which have been made ever since the Reformation, or may still be made, to introduce into the Church under whatever name other sources of doctrine besides Holy Scripture. c.f. Theses on Principles Governing Church Fellowship, 1-3." (Theses of Agreement VIII, 1.)

17. *Apply the Gospel Test in a Dialectical Way* Lecture II, page 8, paragraph 2

Dr Hebart says: "Scripture itself gives us the criterion with which to determine the Gospel content. The Gospel itself is that criterion, and this is found in Scripture itself. But we must use this gospel test in a dialectical way."

I have to acknowledge that this whole paragraph is nonsense to me. Again, I suppose, the trouble with me is I think logically and Dr Hebart thinks dialectically.

Whatever was meant by this paragraph Dr Hebart in the closing sentence admits that it was really irrelevant anyway as of crucial importance to the matter of scriptural authority: "But of course this test can be applied to other writings in the Church and to sermons."

18. *We Know More about the Canon Than the Early Church* Lecture II, page 8, paragraph 4 end

With respect to [Dr] Hebart's historical test of canonicity he says: "But a decision of the Early Church at this point is not absolutely binding: our historical knowledge has grown immensely since that time."

I wish to add only: "and so has our arrogance".

19. *The Danger of Thinking Every Word of the NT is Normative and Authoritative* Lecture II, page 9, paragraph 1

Dr Hebart says: "At the same time we are not in the danger of thinking that every word of the NT is normative and authoritative, simply because it was included by the church in the collection of apostolic writings."

Certainly we believe that every word of Scripture is normative and authoritative. Our Theses of Agreement teach the inspiration of all the words of Scripture: "We teach inspiration in this sense not only of the individual words of the prophets ... of the apostles ... of the Psalms ... and of the Law ... but of 'all Scripture' (2 Timothy 3:16) ie, The Scriptures as a whole ... and in all single passages and words" (Theses VIII,8.) "Inspiration in this sense was the unique action by which God the Holy Ghost gave His Word of revelation to men" (Theses VIII,6.). "We believe that the Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore inerrant." (Theses VIII,10.) "Understanding inerrancy in the normal sense of freedom from all error and contradiction, 'factual' as well as 'theological'" (Statement on Inerrancy 1972). "We believe that the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are the infallible and only source and norm of Christian doctrine and the sure and authoritative guide for life and practice ..." (Theses I,2.)

We do not believe this however, on the basis of the church's choice but on the basis of the apostolic authority given by Christ (Ephesians 2:20).

20. *It is Not Possible to Contain the Christ-event in Clear Formulations* Lecture II, page 9, paragraph 3

"It is not possible for us to contain the Christ-event in clear formulations."

This sounds like Calvin's "finitum non est capax infiniti". It is deceptive jargon. No one wants to *contain* the Christ-event *in formulations*. What can be done and what God has done is to reveal certain clear and precise truths about the Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures. This we believe otherwise there is no revelation at all.

With these comments we have not wished to hurt our venerable Dr Hebart, but responsibly to address ourselves to the issues which he has raised. God have mercy.

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