

THEOLOGY OF THE WORD

Lecture II:

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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In the previous lecture we saw that the written word of God takes up a central position among the many other forms of God's speaking. Oral proclamation preceded the written word and continues to this day. The written word of the Bible has been accorded a higher status than oral proclamation because it is norm for the viva vox of the Church. Nevertheless, this viva vox is no less important than the written word which presupposes the listening people of God. The hearers are claimed, they respond in faith, and so the Church is called into being continually. Because the people of God feel the inner urge to pass on the message from one generation to the next, the great process which began at Pentecost (Acts 4:20) is still with us. In all this movement, the inspiring Holy Spirit, who gave us the written word through prophets and apostles, is still at work through that word in a mediate way. In what way did this written word come into being? What criteria determined which written word should belong to the collection of writings known as the New Testament? And who ultimately made the important decision which in the end resulted in the New Testament canon? It is with these questions that this lecture is concerned, and once again we are confronted with the big questions of inspiration, of the christocentricity of the content of the writings, of the status of the book, and once again also with the sheer humanity that is evident in the process of the formation of the NT canon -it is with these questions that we are now concerned.

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. Of course there are problems here, since we have seen that the relationship of the two testaments to one another is one of continuity and discontinuity. But this problem is rather one of the authority of each testament, and our next lecture will have to deal with that.

At the outset we must note that we cannot a priori establish a theory about a canon and then apply it to determine what is canonical among the writings that content for canonical status. We must see in our consideration of the various writings what appears to emerge as criterion for canonicity. This already indicates that the Church did not set itself up as judge or arbiter in the process; indeed, the role of the Church is very much that of observer, trying to determine what it was that appeared to give some writings the edge over others, brought some into the canon, kept others out .

But why should there have been the need for a canon at all? Could the Church not have relied on the ongoing oral proclamation? The answer to this question is fairly obvious. The ongoing oral proclamation is authentic only if it is in agreement with the original witness of the apostles. The apostolic witness to Jesus and his gospel is source and norm for the message of the Church. Jesus entered our history, and God's work in and through him was in the context of history. This history and its decisive significance does not come down to us in any other way than through those who witnessed and understood it. As oral word, which it originally was, this word of those witnesses is a human word; and yet it has a 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 historical closeness, of immediacy to the very source itself, Jesus.

We raised the question of simply having an ongoing oral proclamation, similar to the situation in the first 20 years after Christ's ascension. But an ongoing oral word cannot be mere anamnesis. As

with our preaching and teaching, it must be contextual, it must enter the place and background of those who hear it. In this sense, the oral word is continually a new word. Obviously, problems arise here: loss of memory, loss of significant aspects of the content, misunderstanding, even wrong transmission, falsification, and so on. So the gospel could be damaged or lost. On the other hand, to lay down strict rules for the ongoing oral message would destroy the freedom of the message, rob it of its life. So there were two requirements for the ongoing preaching of the message: the preservation of the content of the original message and the dynamic and existential aspects of contextual preaching. Therefore, it was necessary that there should be an objective account of the original witness and proclamation of the apostles which would not be lost or merged in the ongoing oral message, but would rather confront it. So for the sake of permanence, the written word became a necessity, enabling the Church in all ages to test the accuracy and authenticity of the ongoing oral proclamation by comparison with the written record of the first and original apostolic witness. So the collection of writings known as the NT came into being.

Partly, these writings were written for the express purpose of safeguarding the oral tradition, e.g. the gospels. Others, like the Pauline letters, did not in the first place have this purpose in mind, but are records of the correspondence of a Christian missionary, written ad hoc for certain people and congregations and probably read out aloud during church worship. In some cases they were intended for a wider circulation (Col. 4:16), and it seems that the congregations themselves kept on circulating all of them. But they were not originally intended for preservation or tradition. However, Paul had a considerable reputation among the congregations, and it is understandable that his letters were duplicated and collected. It is equally clear that in the course of time these letters would be regarded as authentic guarantors of the original apostolic message of Paul. So these collections grew and became the nucleus of what later merged as the canon.

The need for a canon was especially urgent when another problem confronted the Church, viz. the heresies and sects. The significance of an authentic collection of writings in this situation is obvious.

Luther, as is well known, was not so happy about the fact that the gospel ended up in written form. He felt that the written record by its very nature rather suited the OT, particularly the law, with its emphasis on the latter. The viva vox was by far better suited for the proclamation of the gospel. Calvin quite characteristically stressed the book in which God has revealed his will and Law. Generally, this basic difference in the conception of the Bible between the Lutheran and Reformed churches has persisted.

The question now arises whether the formation of the canon could really do affectively what was expected of it. For example, it is conceivable that the Church might in the course of time develop in a direction where it was no longer faithful to the gospel as transmitted by the apostles. The interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Church is a very sensitive area and this interpretation could develop in a way where the canonical writings are no longer able to fulfil their critical function. Interpretation is not merely reproduction, it is creative. The exegete comes to the text with his own understanding of the gospel, with his own subconscious ideas, and though he may genuinely desire to hear only that message which is given in the text, he cannot escape the influence of his context, his Sitz im Leben, and this helps to determine his understanding of the text. So in an extreme case it is conceivable that instead of the Church hearing the message of the canon, it actually hears its own voice. In that case the canon has lost its normative and critical function and has been neutralized. We know that this is not simply a theoretical possibility but actually occurred in the history of the Church, for example in the pre-Reformation Roman Church, in the period of Orthodoxy in the Lutheran Church, in the Pietist, Biblicist era of the early 18th century, in the age of Liberalism in the

late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is a constant danger, and there is really no way of overcoming it once and for all, for example, by setting up something like the Roman Catholic magisterium, which has the task of safeguarding the interpretation of the canon by the Church, by its official interpretation, or by appealing to the theological faculties. What guarantee have we that the magisterium, that faculties are reliable? On any account, a magisterium, a faculty serve the Church, and through them the Church could quite well set itself up as master of the Bible. There would be no guarantee that the canon could perform its independent, critical function.

On the other hand, the Church has faced heretical aberrations with success again and again. Our Lutheran Confessions bear witness to that, as do also numerous *crede* formulations in the Church. This means that the Church has faced and must continue to face the critical function of the canon and submit its interpretation and understanding of the biblical message to that canon for assessment. 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. The Reformation is an excellent example of this fact. This is the advantage of the written word and the canon, because in this form it is a powerful weapon to preserve the evangelical tradition of the apostles. All this presupposes theologians who are able to handle the text in its original language.

So, then, the written word is the only form in which the apostolic witness is present in the proclamation of the Church. This indicates the status of tradition. All denominations have tradition, e.g. in creed or confessional formulations, in hymnody, in liturgy. Tradition is unavoidable; the question is: what is the status accorded to it? The importance of early baptismal symbols is granted and would seem to give these earliest creeds a special place alongside the canon. But this content is strictly taken from the NT and should remind us of the fact that tradition cannot be placed on an equal level with the canon, or even above it. All credal writings have a significance which is under the NT.

One presupposition for a canon must still be indicated: it should be uniform in its witness to the gospel. The early Church was convinced that there was an essential uniformity in all the writings that comprise the canon. This is important because this inner unity is a guarantee that the canon can serve the Church as source and norm for its proclamation.

We may then define the canon of the NT as a collection of writings which are the original, the first, the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ. The 'apostolic' aspect raises the NT writings to a special status and sets them apart from all other later writings in the Church. 'Apostolic' refers to the content of that witness, that is, Jesus Christ. And this is bound to the other aspect, namely, that historically it is the original, the first witness. This makes this witness unique. The christocentricity of this witness must therefore be present in all later messages of the Church, if it is to be canonical. The first, original witness is decisive in the evaluation of all later witness. The name of the author of a writing in the Church is not decisive; it is the content which determines canonicity.

This stress on the original, the first, the apostolic, is, therefore, the historical aspect which we must ascribe to the canon. This raises a problem because it indicates that the boundary line between the canonical writings and later writings in the Church (which claimed considerable authority) is not clear and certain. At this point we again come up against the human side of God's word. There is a rather vague demarcation between the original writings and those of the next generation. In principle the Church is clear about what constitutes the canon, but in the concrete situation there is fumbling. The line of demarcation is relative. Not even the fact that we consider the canon as

closed can alter this situation. We remind ourselves of the fact that the Lutheran Church alone among the denominations never listed the canonical writings in its Confessions. Lutheran Orthodoxy quite understandably rejected this relative openness of the canon-unlike Luther.

Clearly this latter decision meant that the apostolic origin of a number of writings was uncertain and doubtful for a long time. This applied especially to the so-called antilegomena: 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, James, Jude, Hebrews, and Revelation. In some cases, the inner value of the content of some of these writings led to the acknowledgement of their apostolic origin. In the light of the progress of historical-critical insights our evaluation is different. The letter to the Hebrews had canonical standing in the Eastern Church, not so in the Western. Ultimately it was included in the canon because it was mistakenly taught that Paul was its author. 2 Peter, Hebrews, James, and Jude, like 1 and 2 Clement, the Didache, the letter of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas are all post-apostolic writings. Judged by the original definition in the Early Church of what is canonical, the present NT canon should be smaller. This means that we accept our present canon without being able fully to justify its present size. No doubt it can be said that the result of the development is good; all apostolic writings have been included, as also the best material of the post-apostolic age, even if we do not quite know what were the reasons that lay at the back of the decisions. Hebrews was ultimately included, the letter of Barnabas and the first letter of Clement were excluded, although it is interesting that Clement of Alexandria (200 A.D.) still quoted the letter two as canonical.

However, it is not at all difficult even for us to observe the difference in content and significance between much that is in the antilegomena, on the one hand, and the writings of the rest of the NT canon, on the other. All this indicates that we have no utterly clear criteria by which to prove that just these 27 writings should form the canon.

Luther felt this problem acutely. We remind ourselves of his assessment of Hebrews, James, Jude, and the book of Revelation. He departed from the normal order of placing them and put them as a group at the end of the Bible. Furthermore, the Apocrypha of the OT are a problem. The pre-Reformation Church regarded them as canonical and the Roman Church does so to this day. This is due to the fact that in that church the Greek Septuagint tended to be used as the OT version, and this included the Apocrypha. However, in the Hebrew Masoretic text they are excluded. Calvin rejected them. Luther included them, but with the comment that they were useful for reading; in other words, he does not accept them as canonical but is not prepared to exclude them either. Lutheran Orthodoxy accepted this. In regard to the antilegomena, Chemnitz and Gerhard still followed Luther. But 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.

The gospel is certainly not equally original and clear in those writings. We could say: the more the aspect of originality is present historically, and the more Christ is proclaimed, the greater is the authority of a writing.

In all this, an important consideration has been suggested by Calvinist theologians. They have referred to the testimonium spiritus sancti internum and pointed out that in the whole development of the canon the Holy Spirit was at work. The experience of the NT Church with the NT writings indicates that here the experience of being claimed by the message of the writings and the experience of not being claimed by others was a safe guide for the Church and helped it as it observed what from this angle can be called the growth of the canon. And it is true that the Church

never made an official declaration about the content of the canon. Only when the process was complete did some denominations issue an official list in their confessional writings.

This reference to the testimonium spiritus sancti is doubtful, because Rom. 8:16 ('It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God') refers to his work in us to distinguish the truth of the gospel from heresy. It does not refer to the distinction between apostolic writings and antilegomena.

Certainly this whole matter of the canon raises the question of inspiration, and the inclusion of writings would suggest their inspiration, the exclusion their non-inspiration. As we have seen, 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 here the witness of the Holy Spirit is relevant. That witness cannot, however, draw the line between canonical and non-canonical. Here we are confronted with the decision of faith. Everything that is Word of God in written form must be in the canon. But this statement of faith cannot quieten the concern about the periphery of the canon, about the uncertainty here. As always we also meet the other conviction of faith here: that God's Word is at once human and divine. And in accepting the divinity, we dare not underplay the equally important humanity. The difference between antilegomena and the other writings and, related to this problem, the question of authority of Scripture is not affected by the uncertainty on the edge of the canon. Only a propositional view of the Bible is likely to be shattered by the problem of the edge of the canon. This means that at this point the evangelical freedom of the authority of Scripture is preserved.

Certainty about the NT canon must, apart from faith, note the following two points. There must be, as we have seen, the centrality of Christ in the content, and there must be the purely historical aspect of the original, first, apostolic witness. The NT writings must be examined as to whether they preach Christ. And they must be able to show that we have genuine apostolic witness in them. In the first instance the whole process of the growth of the canon was a historical, human one in which human considerations played their part. But there is also the theological aspect: the question whether in the process of growth unevangelical elements were included. Luther maintained that in James and in the book of Revelation features are observable which do not harmonize with the rest of Scripture. We do not follow Luther in these critical evaluations, but the very fact that he queried these writings stresses the fact that it is the task of the Church to test them in regard to their gospel content.

Thus writings which in general share with other NT writings the christocentric thrust at the same time do not share with them the central proclamation of Christ in some aspects of their message. Hebrews denies the possibility of a second repentance; Jude has a different concept of faith; Revelation expects a messianic millenium; 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. Even in writings whose canonical status is not queried we come across elements which do not seem to represent the central kerygma of Christ. And Paul even quotes an apocryphal word from an unknown writing in 1 Cor. 2:9. All this is an indication that the borderline of the canon runs through its very middle.

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. The gospel is in the writings of the NT, and at the same time it is older than Scripture and above Scripture. That means that Scripture is both object and subject of the gospel test. Scripture is

not only its own interpreter, but also its own critic. This test, then, determines whether and how much a writing preaches Christ. But of course this test can be applied to other writings in the Church and to sermons.

There is the historical test, the closeness of a writing to the original witness of the apostles. This is a task which belongs to the field of Introduction to the NT and is a purely formal, scientific piece of work.

All this indicates what role the Church has to play in the matter of the canon. We receive the canon from the Early Church and are dependent on that church and its decision. But this does not mean that the authority of the Church and its tradition and its magisterium guarantee that canon, as is the case in the Roman Catholic Church. The church of today can and should reach certainty about the canon by testing what the Early Church did. And then there is the witness to God's mighty act in Christ. This witness needs to guarantee: it confirms itself by its own power; the Church can merely experience it in the same way as the Early Church did. The gospel authenticates itself at all times. But whether the canonical writings in an immediate or mediate way offer us the apostolic witness - that is a matter of a historical test. Here the decision of the Early Church must command respect and the tradition about writings and their authors will have to be considered. But a decision of the Early Church at this point is not absolutely binding; our historical knowledge has grown immensely since that time. In this area, too, the Church cannot guarantee the extent of the canon.

So, then, to repeat: the borderline of the canon runs right through its very middle, and that is why the two tests indicated above are always our obligation. Only in this way can we fully understand the many forms of the proclamation of Christ and accept it as the norm, for our own preaching and teaching. 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.

And, to repeat, the NT canon is closed from the historical angle, even though we apply the critical historical test. But the gospel test always challenges us to determine that canon again, for ourselves. In this way, the canon shares all the accidents and uncertainties of history. At the same time, however, it also participates in the unique and absolute significance of God's mighty act in Christ. It is not possible for us to contain the Christ-event in clear formulations. Just as little can we clearly define the boundary line of the canon which seeks to preserve the witness to that event.

This may indeed fill us with dismay, but we cannot escape it. For the believer, the uncertainty of the borderline of the NT canon points to the incarnation of the Logos, to all that disturbing humanity which is equally present with the divinity and in, with, and under which alone the divinity is present.

