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Canon of the New Testament

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THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT*

Simon J. Kistemaker

In the last decade, interest in the canon has increased significantly. Such interest, of course, comes to expression in numerous articles and books on the subject. Even publishing houses get in on the act. I am thinking of the so-called ecumenical Bible published in 1973 by Collins in New York City. This Bible is the Revised Standard Version, which has in addition to the OT and NT the apocryphal and deuterocanonical books. On the cover the term "Common Bible" appears, obviously to promote sales among Protestants, Catholics and members of the Greek Orthodox communion. Strictly speaking, however, this ecumenical Bible is not so "common," because Protestants do not accept the apocryphal and deuterocanonical books as canonical.

Nevertheless, some scholars believe that the shape and content of the canon needs revision. David L. Dungan has surveyed the articles and books written of late on the canon of the NT. He mentions such areas as recently discovered apocryphal gospels at Nag Hammadi, Septuagintal studies, Greek NT MS collections, and ecumenical concerns. He notes—somewhat prophetically—"intense activity which will sooner or later precipitate a massive series of changes regarding the shape and content of the Bible which would rival for creativity the Reformation period, if not the second through the fifth centuries."¹ Whether such activity will indeed materialize remains to be seen.

The question of what books are to be in the NT canon arose, of course, in apostolic times. In those days the Church asked what books were to be received as the very Word of God. Though some books like the gospels were readily accepted by the entire Church, others like the general epistles of James, Peter, Jude, Hebrews and Revelation were not universally received until the fourth century.

I. APOSTOLIC TIMES

A. *Apocryphal Literature*

When in 1958 the Gospel of Thomas was published, and the British press called it the "fifth gospel," the average reader knew that another apocryphal gospel had been discovered. And when some years later Kurt Aland published his synopsis of the four gospels,² he did not add the Gospel of Thomas as a fifth gospel. He incorporated it as an

*Simon Kistemaker, professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi, delivered this presidential address at the 28th annual meeting of ETS, December 28, 1976.

¹D. L. Dungan, "The New Testament Canon in Recent Study," *Int* 29/4 (1975) 339 ff.

²K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1967) 517-530.

appendix. The Gospel of Truth, which like the Gospel of Thomas is part of the Nag Hammadi library, did not even come that far. These two gospels simply are not gospels. The sayings in the Gospel of Thomas depend on the canonical gospels for the authentic tradition of the words of Jesus.³ Similarly, the Gospel of Truth draws from the synoptic and Johannine gospel traditions and from the epistles of Paul, Peter, John, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and Revelation.⁴ These documents do not add to the redemptive revelation given in the twenty-seven books of the NT. Instead, to a large extent they further the cause of gnosticism prevalent in the second century.

Church fathers, including Hippolytus and Origen, quoted and referred to the Gospel of Thomas. Tertullian was not unfamiliar with the writings of Valentinus of Rome, who presumably is the author of the Gospel of Truth. Yet the Church fathers nowhere promoted these gospels to canonical status.

Gnostics, among others, obviously were in need of sacred literature. They adopted existing gospels, acts, and epistles. Moreover, they composed their own documents based on the canonical books. Thus the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Truth appeared, as well as the Acts of Peter and the Acts of Thomas. In some segments of the Church a few books even gained temporary recognition. The Church, however, shunned forgery, as can be seen from two incidents that come to us from the early Church.

In the middle of the second century, a presbyter in Asia Minor composed the Acts of Paul. Upon confessing his deed and giving as his reason his love for the apostle Paul, the presbyter was summarily deposed from office.⁵

The second example concerns Serapion, bishop of Antioch. He had visited the church of Rhossus, where he was asked to give his opinion on the Gospel of Peter. Although at first and in ignorance he gave the church permission to read the gospel, after taking due note of it and deeming the gospel heretical he immediately wrote the church a letter forbidding the use of the Gospel of Peter. In part the letter read as follows: "We receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ, but we reject the writings falsely attributed to them, for we know that such were not handed down to us."⁶

Because of unmistakable forgery, the Church did not accept the Epistle to the Laodiceans, written in Latin, even though the introductory verse of this epistle is quite similar to the first verse of Paul's letter to the Galatians. It reads, "Paul, an apostle, sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ, to the brothers who are at Laodicea." The Muratorian Canon states that such an epistle "cannot be received into the catholic church because it is not fitting for gall to be mixed with honey."⁷ That is

³B. Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Harper, 1961).

⁴F. W. Beare, "Canon of the NT," *IDB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 526.

⁵Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 17.

⁶Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, VI.12.3.

⁷F. W. Grosheide, *Some Early Lists of the Books of the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1948) 11.

not to say that the epistle did not circulate in the Church. In fact, the Second Council of Nicea in A. D. 787 warned the Church not to read the epistle publicly anymore.

The early Church, therefore, had to pass judgment on what was and was not acceptable. One might assert that the Church judged on the basis of apostolicity, and this may have been true in some segments of the Church—for example, Alexandria in Egypt during the latter half of the second century. But this criterion breaks down because some books in the NT canon were not written by apostles. Clement of Alexandria accepted the Epistle to the Hebrews because, said he, it was written by the apostle Paul. Herman Ridderbos forcefully rejects this type of reasoning: “No matter how strong may be the evidence for apostolicity and therefore of canonicity in many instances, and no matter how forceful may be the arguments in other cases in favor of apostolicity of certain writings, an historical judgment cannot be the final and sole ground for the acceptance of the New Testament as canonical by the church. To do so would mean that the church would base its faith on the results of historical investigation.”⁸

B. *Apostolic Tradition*

When Irenaeus in A. D. 180 wrote his books against heresies, he wrote a century and half after the death and resurrection of Jesus and somewhat more than eighty years after the death of the apostle John. Longevity may very well have spanned this period of time by means of only one or two persons. Caspar Gregory at the beginning of the twentieth century provides an historical incident of two men who carried a tradition of special significance, namely the moving of Yale College from Saybrook to New Haven, over a period of 172 years.⁹ Longevity in the first and second centuries was not uncommon. Polycarp said when he was martyred that he had served the Lord eighty-six years. Simon the son of Clopas died a martyr at the age of one hundred and twenty. When Irenaeus wrote his book, he relied on tradition handed on to him by a number of persons—perhaps even by people who had personally listened to the apostles. I am thinking about the daughters of Philip the evangelist, who had entertained Paul in their home at Caesarea. Polycarp saw these daughters of Philip at Hierapolis. Polycarp himself may have met the apostle John. In brief, the course of tradition in the second century is not at all frail and incomplete.

The early Church was fully acquainted with the concept of tradition. For instance, the believers in the church at Thessalonica are told to hold on to the traditions they were taught. Paul emphasizes this concept in both epistles addressed to this church. Says Paul in the first chapter of his first epistle, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you received the message with the joy given by the Holy

⁸H. Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963) 36. Also see H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 330.

⁹C. Gregory, *Canon and Text of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1907) 161.

Spirit. And you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia" (vv 6 and 7). The chain of tradition becomes apparent in these verses: The links in the chain are "receive" and "deliver." From Jesus the message went to Paul, from Paul it went to the Thessalonians, and from the Thessalonians it went to the people of Macedonia and Achaia.¹⁰

Paul uses the terminology of "receive" and "deliver" at least two times in his first letter to the Corinthians. "For I received from the Lord what I *also* passed on to you" (11:23; see 15:3). The word "also" should be understood as "in my turn." The tradition to which Paul and other NT writers (see Luke 1:2) refer originates in the authority of Christ. It is transmitted at first by eyewitnesses. Tradition is governed by apostolic authority, which finds its origin in Christ. Behind the tradition recorded in the NT stands Jesus Christ. He is the first link in the chain of tradition. The apostles transmitted this tradition through sound teaching. "What you (Timothy) have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching," says Paul in 2 Timothy 1:13. The apostolic deposit was kept and transmitted by way of faithful teachers. At first they taught by word of mouth, and as time progressed they taught by means of the written page.¹¹

C. *Apostolic Authority*

Already in the second century the gospels, and the epistles of Paul, are considered holy Scripture. NT books, however, never became holy books.¹² Paul tells the Christians to read his letters in their assemblies. The Christians in Thessalonica, Colosse and Laodicea are charged to exchange and read in public Paul's epistles (1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16).¹³ John writes in his prologue to the book of Revelation that he expects his book to be read in the churches (1:3). His gospel also conveys the distinct impression that he considered his work to be Scripture. "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24). Because of these written words, the reader is asked to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (20:31).

The apostolic fathers, including Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp, not only regarded the words of Jesus as authoritative; they also indicated that the apostles shared this divine authority. Writes Clement of Rome, "The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus the Christ was sent from God. The Christ therefore is from God and the Apostles from the Christ" (42:1-2; tr. Kirsopp Lake).

The apostles shared in the authority of Jesus Christ. Bishops and deacons, according to the apostolic fathers, did not receive this authority because they were not directly commissioned by the Lord.¹⁴ But the

¹⁰S. Kistemaker, *The Gospels in Current Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 91.

¹¹Beare, "Canon," p. 525.

¹²Ridderbos, *Authority*, p. 25.

¹³R. L. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957) 234.

¹⁴D. A. Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 339-340.

words of the apostles, because of this direct commission, were placed on the same level of authority as the words of the Lord. And because the words of Jesus were regarded as equal in authority to the Scriptures of the OT, therefore also apostolic writings possessed the same authority as the canonical books of the OT.

D. *Apostolic Fathers*

What does this say for the books of the apostolic fathers? Clement of Rome says that his own letter has been "written through the Holy Spirit" (*1 Clem.* 63:2).¹⁵ Near the end of the second century he is referred to as the "apostle Clement" by Clement of Alexandria. And Eusebius, commenting on Clement's letter, says that it enjoyed recognition in the churches because in earlier times as well as his own it was read publicly in the assemblies.¹⁶ *1 Clement*, however, is not listed as Scripture in sub-apostolic times. This is rather remarkable in view of the fact that both John's Revelation and Clement's first epistle were written in A. D. 95. Revelation is part of the NT canon; *1 Clement* is not. Irenaeus held *1 Clement* in high esteem without granting it any status.¹⁷ Except for its inclusion in Codex Alexandrinus, a document of the fifth century, *1 Clement* has never been accepted as canonical.

At least two sub-apostolic writings, the *Didache* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, were called Scripture and gained acceptance in the early Church. The *Didache* was used in the churches of Egypt as late as the third century and was read publicly in Syria until A. D. 400. Origen regarded the *Shepherd of Hermas* as apostolic. Codex Sinaiticus, a document of the fourth century, lists *Hermas* with the canonical books of the New Testament.

Obviously, this question may be asked: "What criteria did the early Church apply in accepting books as apostolic and designating them as Scripture?" To say that a document needs apostolic authority in order to be accepted does not always appear applicable. Therefore we cannot merely consider the available historical evidence. We are also obliged to pay close attention to the internal evidence of canonical and non-canonical writings.

II. AUTHORITY

A. *Scripture*

The writers of the NT, as well as the post-apostolic authors, assert that the sayings of Jesus have authority equal to the words of the OT. In fact, in the NT evidence is at hand that the words of the NT are equal in authority to those of the OT. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul quotes

¹⁵A. C. Sundberg, Jr., "The Making of the New Testament Canon," *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) 1217.

¹⁶Eusebius, *Church History*, 3:15-16.

¹⁷Feine, Behm and Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 345.

Scripture from both OT and NT: "For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages'" (5:18). The first quote comes from Deuteronomy 25:4, the second from Luke 10:7. And both citations are introduced by "Scripture says." It is striking that Paul puts this verbatim quote from Luke's gospel on the same level as the OT and calls both citations "Scripture."

Likewise, Peter mentions the word "Scripture": "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:15-16). It appears that Peter's initial reference is to Romans 2:4 but secondly to all of Paul's letters.¹⁸ The point is that these letters are placed on a par with the the OT Scriptures.

Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp and others did not hesitate to accept the letters of Paul and regard them as Scripture. Donald Hagner notes, "The Apostolic Fathers are essentially united in their witness to the authority of the new writings; there is no radical change in the valuation of these writings between A. D. 95 and A. D. 140."¹⁹

The word "Scripture" may not necessarily be used. Thus Clement of Rome speaks of the gospel written by Paul (*1 Clem.* 47:2), and Ignatius refers to the ordinances of the Lord and the apostles (*Magn.* 13:1; *Trall.* 7:1). Polycarp, in his epistle to the church at Philippi, quotes a passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He writes, "Only, as it is said in these Scriptures, 'Be ye angry and sin not,' and 'Let not the sun go down upon your wrath'" (*Pol. Phil.* 12:1; tr. Kirsopp Lake).

It is noteworthy that Polycarp uses the expression "Scriptures." The citation, of course, is from Psalm 4:4 (4:5 Hebrew) and Ephesians 4:26. Polycarp considers Paul's letter to the Ephesians Scripture and to be equal to the OT. Elsewhere in his epistle Polycarp speaks of Christ, the apostles, the gospel and the prophets (*Pol. Phil.* 6:2-3). He explains the term "prophets" by saying that they were the ones who foretold the coming of the Lord. Polycarp has the OT prophets in mind. He clearly indicates that the prophets of the OT and the apostles of the NT wrote with equal authority. Yet the evidence remains that a few documents of the post-apostolic age were considered Scripture in certain parts of the Church.²⁰ The Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas were used as Scripture here and there in the first few centuries. The epistle written by Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, though not quoted as Scripture, did transmit the apostolic tradition. The epistle

¹⁸F. F. Bruce, "Origins of the New Testament Canon," *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 10.

¹⁹Hagner, *Use*, p. 344.

²⁰Sundberg, "Making," p. 1217. See also Sundberg, "The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration," *Int* 29/4 (1975) 365. And see R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 206.

echoes the preaching of the apostles and was written by a man who knew many of the apostles personally. In fact, Eusebius wished to identify Clement of Rome with Paul's "fellow worker" mentioned in Philippians 4:3. Irenaeus shows great respect for Clement of Rome and appreciation for his letter: "Clement was allotted the bishopric. This man, as he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, might be said to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing (in his ears), and their tradition before his eyes. Nor was he alone, for there were many still remaining who had received instructions from the apostles. In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren at Corinth, the Church in Rome despatched a most powerful letter to the Corinthians" (*Heresies* 3,3,3; tr. Roberts and Donaldson). Though Clement of Rome received the traditions from the apostles and wrote a letter to the Corinthians, his epistle did not enter the canon of the NT.

B. *Christ's Authority*

Transmitting apostolic traditions, though important, is not a decisive criterion. Rather, the content of a given document must demonstrate that the author speaks with authority Christ has given him.²¹ The content of a document must show that the author has been inspired by the Holy Spirit.

How could the letter of Clement written to the church at Corinth fail to gain acceptance in the Church universal? Having been in the company of the apostles, the author of 1 Clement is able to speak their language, but his message lacks their authority.

We cannot draw lines of demarcation and indicate with historical accuracy who belonged and who did not belong to the apostolic circle. The New Testament does not even restrict apostolicity to twelve people who followed Jesus from the time of his baptism to the time of his ascension (Acts 1:22). Matthias takes the place of Judas; and Paul, at least fifteen years after the ascension of Jesus, is called an apostle. Is James, the brother of Jesus, an apostle (Gal 1:19)? Are Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy, referred to as apostles by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:6 and 1 Thessalonians 2:6, members of the apostolate? Where does the author of the epistle to the Hebrews fit in?

Canonicity does not depend in every instance on the person of the apostle. A writer of a NT book, for example Luke, may belong to the apostolic circle. And who the author of Hebrews may have been, God only knows (as Origen says). But one thing is certain: When the writers speak they do so with the authority Jesus Christ has given them.²² Behind the canon of the NT stands Jesus Christ, who establishes the canon in word and work. By transmitting his authority to the writers of the NT and by endowing them with the Holy Spirit, "Christ establishes

²¹Ridderbos, *Authority*, p. 35.

²²N. B. Stonehouse, "The Authority of the New Testament," *The Infallible Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 114.

the canon and gives it historical form."²³ Basically, therefore, the canon of the NT must be viewed Christologically. Luther, by means of his well-known saying about the books of the New Testament "ob sie Christum treiben" (whether they proclaim Christ), did indeed point to Jesus Christ as the essence of the canon.²⁴

C. Human Authority

Do the apostolic fathers place themselves on a level with the writers of the NT? The answer must be negative. Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp do not claim for themselves divine authority. Ignatius speaks with authority when he addresses the churches in his letters. However, he does not put himself in the same category as the apostles. In his letter to the Romans, he writes: "I do not order you as did Peter and Paul; they were Apostles, I am a convict" (4:3; tr. Kirsopp Lake). Also, in his letter to the Trallians, Ignatius deprecates himself: "I am sparing you in my love, though I might write more sharply on his behalf: I did not think myself competent, as a convict, to give orders like an Apostle" (3:3; tr. Kirsopp Lake).

Likewise, Clement of Rome and Polycarp indicate that they do not have the wisdom and authority the apostles had. The apostles received their authority from Jesus Christ (see *1 Clem.* 42:1-3; 44:1-2; 47:1-3; *Pol. Phil.* 3:2). Though Clement of Rome is breathing the spirit of the apostles in his epistle, he does not place himself on a par with the apostles. Also, he does not claim to speak with apostolic authority. His is the voice of man.

Additionally, no writer in the early centuries ascribed to Clement's epistle authority equal to the books of the NT. Irenaeus, though regarding the epistle with high esteem, does not consider it a primary source of truth.²⁵ Clement's letter is not the source of truth, but it is the channel through which apostolic tradition is transmitted. Likewise Clement of Alexandria, though he refers to Clement of Rome as the "Apostle Clement," and though he quotes *1 Clement* frequently with much respect, does not consider it equal to Scripture.

The letter of Clement written to the Corinthian church is indeed one step removed from the authoritative writings of the NT. The occasion for the composition of the letter was a schism in the church at Corinth. Many of the clergy had been deposed. Clement, writing on behalf of the church at Rome, appeals to the Corinthians for the sake of Christ to end the controversy.²⁶ The epistle is an appeal for unity, harmony and love, in which quotes and allusions from Scripture occur in nearly every chapter. Because of these quotes and allusions, *1 Clement* has the appearance of a Scriptural document. Yet in itself it is not

²³Ridderbos, *Authority*, p. 40.

²⁴J. W. Montgomery, *God's Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974) 79.

²⁵J. B. Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers, Part One, S. Clement of Rome* (London: Macmillan, 1890) 366.

²⁶R. J. Deferrari, ed., *The Fathers of the Church: The Apostolic Fathers* (Washington: Catholic University, 1969) 4.

Scripture, nor does it intend to be such.

III. CANON

A. *Essence of the Canon*

The apostles proclaimed the gospel in word and deed. They transmitted the apostolic tradition with authority. They opposed heresy and taught the truth by both word of mouth and the written page. The Church received the apostolic doctrine in oral and written form during the first century.²⁷ When the apostles died, the written form became the only source. The Church accepted these apostolic writings because they were uniquely authoritative. This authority originated in the divine commission the writers received from Christ.²⁸ In brief, the Church realized that these books came from the Lord. Because Jesus Christ stands behind the twenty-seven books of the NT canon, the Church in faith acknowledged and accepted these books as the embodiment of the history of redemption. In them the Lord transmitted and communicated the plan of salvation, the history of redemption, the extent of revelation. Therefore the apostles, fully commissioned by Christ, were witnesses of what had occurred in the fulness of time; they were proclaiming the gospel of salvation, they unfolded the history of redemption, and they were entrusted with the continuation of God's revelation.²⁹ The apostles were not simply preachers and writers. They were channels through which God gave man divine revelation. Apostolic preaching by word or letter was part of the actuality of revelation. The writings of the apostolic fathers simply do not unfold the history of redemption. The letters of Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp not only lack the authority that characterizes the canonical books of the NT; they also fail to add to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. God's written revelation came to expression in his Son (Heb 1:2) and was completed when the last NT book appeared. Jakob Van Bruggen made a fitting comment on the concluding verses of the last chapter of Revelation, where the reader is warned not to add anything. He pointed out that in these last verses of the Bible God asserts his copyright.³⁰

B. *Progressive Revelation*

The NT displays an orderly scheme in advancing revelation. The individual books of the NT have been given their respective places, in the providence of God, to make up an organic unit. In brief, the twenty-seven books of the NT have been given to the Church as an account of divinely perfected revelation.³¹

²⁷E. Flesseman-Van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1954) 66-67.

²⁸Hagner, *Use*, p. 346.

²⁹Ridderbos, *Authority*, p. 16.

³⁰J. Van Bruggen, "Het Nieuwe Testament," *Oriëntatie in de Theologie* (Kampen: Vuurbaak, n. d.) 65.

³¹T. D. Bernhard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n. d.) 37.

The message of the NT Scriptures controls the development of the canon—that is, the NT displays three stages of development concluded by a summary: the gospels, the Acts, the epistles, and as a summary John's Revelation.

The words and deeds of Jesus Christ are recorded in the synoptic gospels: Matthew's gospel was written for the Jews, that of Mark for the Romans, and Luke's for the Hellenists. The Gospel of John completes the sequence. Virtually nothing, however, is repeated in the fourth gospel of that which is incorporated in the synoptics. The Gospel of John is a supplementary gospel. It adds new dimensions to the history of redemption and it gives further revelation.

The second stage introduces the history of the early Church as recorded in Acts. Again, in its development the NT does not fall into repetition. The Book of Acts is void of any direct quotes or references to the gospels. It describes the spread of the gospel beginning in Jerusalem and going to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The church is being established in the world.

The third stage is marked by the teaching of God's truth to churches and individuals by means of numerous letters written by apostles and associates. Once again, the characteristic feature of non-repetition is evident. The writers of these epistles do not quote the words and deeds of Jesus recorded in the four gospels (with the exception of Luke 10:7 in 1 Timothy 5:18). They do not elaborate on the historical incidents that Luke set forth in Acts. Instead, the writers develop the teachings of the gospels and apply those teachings to churches and individuals. Paul teaches the doctrines of salvation, pneumatology, ecclesiology, Christology and eschatology. The author of Hebrews presents a theological and practical discourse on the doctrines of the priesthood and the covenant. James, and especially Peter and Jude, address themselves to the perseverance of the saints and to the doctrine of the last things.

The Revelation of John is the capstone of Scripture. It is a concise summary of the history of redemption that points to the consummation of time. In total it has some 278 allusions to the OT. The teachings of this book reveal a glorious unity, a progression of thought, and perfect agreement with the entire Bible.³² When the last book of the NT was composed, nothing could be added to God's written revelation. His written word has been completed in the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments.

C. Qualitative and Quantitative Canon

When the books of the NT first appeared, the Church began to distinguish between what was part of the apostolic tradition and what was not. The Church, therefore, was led by the Holy Spirit to accept a limited canon of twenty-seven NT books. The Church made a distinction between canonical and non-canonical books. It marked the boundary

³²W. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971) 42.

between the time of the apostles and the time of the Church, between the time of laying the foundation and the time of building on that foundation, between apostolic tradition and ecclesiastical tradition.³³ By accepting and acknowledging the authority of the canonical books, the Church thus precluded other writings, even though they were useful for reading in private and public devotions.

By giving divine authority to the writers of the NT, Christ entrusted to the Church a canon that is absolutely unique. The canon embodies the progressive revelation of God in Christ and comes to completion with the last book of the NT. For this reason, no other writings were or can be added to this unique revelation. The NT canon is complete.

When the last book of the NT was written, the Church did not have a collection of twenty-seven books constituting the canon. Oral tradition existed next to the written page. But when in subsequent decades oral tradition began to diminish in force, the Church was led to acknowledge the written books of the NT.³⁴ Perhaps for this early stage we may say that the Church accepted the qualitative canon, and that as the centuries passed the Church acknowledged the quantitative canon. Before the Church reached universal agreement on the canonicity of all the NT books considerable time elapsed. The books themselves, of course, have always been uniquely authoritative from the time of their composition. Therefore, we speak of a qualitative canon in early stages that led to a quantitative canon centuries later. The incipient canon began to exist near the end of the first century.³⁵ The completed canon was recognized by the Church near the end of the fourth century.

The Church did not create the canon.³⁶ The Church merely ratified decisions that had already been reached by believers individually and by congregations collectively. Among the believers, the canon grew from the bottom to the top—that is, the Church assembled in ecumenical councils did not decree that the NT canon ought to consist of twenty-seven books. The Church merely acknowledged these books as canonical. The individual believers meeting in worship had accepted these books and had acknowledged that they came from God. When this tenet was confessed universally, the councils of the fourth century ratified it.

IV. WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Believers do not come to acknowledge the canonicity of Scripture without the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. The Holy Spirit speaks within the heart of the believer and testifies that Scripture is self-authenticating and true. The witness of the Holy Spirit in the total Christian community, from the first century to the present, is an

³³O. Cullmann, *The Early Church* (London: SCM, 1966) 89.

³⁴G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 85.

³⁵Hagner, *Use*, p. 347.

³⁶K. Aland, *The Problem of the New Testament Canon* (London: Mowbray, 1962) 18.

essential element in acknowledging Scripture as God's inspired Word.³⁷ The authoritative writings of the apostles and their associates cannot be identified without the operation of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers.³⁸ In the words of Jesus, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

With respect to the composition of the NT, the work of the Holy Spirit begins with the apostles and those belonging to the apostolic circle—that is, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit commences in the hearts of the apostles. Through the Holy Spirit they became God's instruments for writing the inspired history of redemption. They did not merely respond subjectively to the truth of the gospel. Objectively they wrote this truth in the form of inspired gospels and letters. They were guided by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said to the apostles, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Thus the Holy Spirit does not speak of himself; he will speak in the name of Jesus Christ and teach the words spoken by Christ. Jesus Christ is speaking through the Holy Spirit to the apostles. Therefore, the very words proclaimed and written by the apostles are not the words of men. They are the word of God (1 Thess 2:13).

In conclusion, we know that through Jesus Christ the inspired books of the NT are canon. Jesus Christ has established his canon and has entrusted it to the Church as a sacred deposit. He stands back of the canon because he himself has given man his Word. He reveals himself in the Scriptures, and therefore Scripture is the living Word of God. As that most eloquent NT writer, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, sums it up: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1-2).

³⁷Bruce, "Origins," p. 18.

³⁸Ridderbos, *Authority*, p. 32.