

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION
IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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*“I want to know one thing: the way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He has written it down in a book. Oh, give me that book!
At any price give me the book of God.”
- John Wesley*

*“I would not have believed the gospel, unless the authority
of the Church had induced me.”
-St. Augustine*

Sola Quod Scriptura?

Christians of all ages are taught to put their faith in the Holy Bible as being God’s sure word. In Sunday School children are taught to affirm that, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and in Seminary students learn that, “When speaking of its divine authority, the Bible makes it clear that this is a final authority, the court of last appeal in everything that it affirms . . . the Bible, and the Bible alone, is a supremely authoritative book in matters of faith and practice.”¹

The simple affirmation of the Bible as God’s truth introduces a more fundamental question, however: What is the Bible? For Protestants / Evangelicals, “The sixty-six canonical books of the Protestant canon alone are invested with divine authority.”² But this is a recent and minority position in the history of the Church. The Roman Catholic Council of Trent, at its

¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Introduction, Bible*. Vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002), 240-241.

² Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 241.

fourth session (1546), reacted to the Reformation by including the Apocryphal books in its Old Testament.³ The Eastern Orthodox Church includes *3 Maccabees*, *Psalms 151*, and other additions not recognized by either Protestant or Roman Catholic churches.⁴ Some Oriental Orthodox Churches⁵ include the Old Testament Apocryphal books, as well as both adding books to, and subtracting books from, the standard New Testament.

The *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* defines “canon” as “is by origin a Greek word, denoting a straight rod or rule, and thus a criterion, and (together with its cognates ‘canonical’ and ‘canonize’) it began to be applied by Christian writers of the later 4th century AD to the correct collection and list of the Scriptures.”⁶ This authoritative collection “needs to be listed for the avoidance of confusion and doubt.”⁷ Clearly, the question of which books count as *the Bible* cannot be answered simply by opening one’s personal Bible to its table of contents. The issue at hand is known as the question of the canon, and it is of supreme importance for the Christian – especially for the Protestant who holds to *sola scriptura*,⁸ for if Scripture alone is held to be one’s highest authority, then one must be able to identify it.

³ See Bruce Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Annotated Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), E-H. Note that though some Roman Catholic writers speak of the Apocrypha as ‘deutero-canonical,’ the Church’s official teaching includes them as inspired books of the canon (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sections 120, 138).

⁴ See *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2008).

⁵ E.G. Ethiopian, Coptic, Armenian, Syriac, etc. The *Peshitta*, for example, excludes 2-3 John, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation. For the expanded Ethiopian canon see <http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/canonical/books.html> (accessed April 21, 2010).

⁶ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), s.v. “Scripture.” Canonical language first arose at the time when it was becoming possible to put the Scriptures into a single volume. The 4th-century codices, *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus*, are the earliest known examples.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ On the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* see Greg Bahnsen, “Is Sola Scriptura a Protestant Concoction? A Biblical Defense of Sola Scriptura” (Lecture, Covenant Media Foundation, Texarkana, AR. Transcribed David T. King. <http://www.christiantruth.com/articles/bahnsen.html> [accessed April 16, 2010]), James

The Historical Formation of the Canon

Craig Allert notes that, “A high view of Scripture should take account of the historical processes that bequeathed to us the Bible . . . surely what the Bible *is* has much importance for what the Bible *says*.”⁹ Christianity, unlike many other religions, does not have a Scripture written by its founder.¹⁰ The Christian New Testament was written over a period of at least 40 years by the followers of its founder, Jesus Christ.¹¹ The process of determining which books would belong to this collection is thus of paramount importance. While the canon issue has staggering implications for many other theological issues such as God’s providence, the nature and function of the Church, and several facets of the Roman Catholic – Protestant debate,¹² this paper will focus only on the actual historical procedure used to determine the New Testament canon.¹³

The basic facts are that our new Testament books had considerable authority in the 1st-2nd centuries. During the 2nd-3rd centuries the Church added to these books, and by the 4th century

R. White, *Scripture Alone* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), and Norman L. Geisler, “A Critical Review of *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* by Keith Mathison.” *Christian Apologetics Journal* 4, no.1 (Spring 2005): 117-129.

⁹ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 10-11.

¹⁰ Clearly the Christian New Testament at least differs from the Islamic *Qur'an* or the Jewish *Pentateuch* in that with these latter, the movement’s prophet, inspired by God or not, wrote their Scripture themselves.

¹¹ A conservative estimate. See F. F. Bruce, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹² For an interesting discussion of canon issues with regard to hermeneutics and theology, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Daniel M. Doriani, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and William J. Webb. *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*. Ed. Gary T. Meadors. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

¹³ “Determine” here is used in an intentionally ambiguous manner. Whether it should be taken as “discover” or “decide” is part of the canon debate. See Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 173.

official canon lists emerge.¹⁴ Judging from frequency of citation, the formation of the New Testament Canon took place in three basic phases with continuing debate following.¹⁵

First Phase: 1st Century— Establishing the Central Core

By the end of the 1st century most of the New Testament books were already in use by churches and cited frequently by Church Fathers. Other books, later to be excluded from the canon (such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and *1 Clement*) were also being used, but these were cited less frequently. Some books, such as *Acts*, *Revelation*, and some of the shorter epistles, seem to have been accorded second-class status.

An important distinction to keep in mind at this stage is that between “Scripture” and “the Canon of Scripture.” The two concepts are not equivalent in their early use.¹⁶ The issue, as F. F. Bruce notes, was which “books which might properly be read in church.”¹⁷ Bruce states that,

Those which were recognizably vested with the authority of the Lord and the apostles were prescribed for public reading; but in some churches at least other works were read which, although they lacked apostolic authority, were orthodox and edifying. . . . [for example] between seventy and eighty years after it was sent, 1 Clement continued to be read at services of the Corinthian church. Neither it nor the more recent letter from Rome carried anything like the authority of the letters which the Corinthian church had received from Paul; but they were helpful for the building up of Christian faith and life.¹⁸

¹⁴ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 50-52.

¹⁵ Following Allert in *Ibid.* More will be said about this criterion over against other suggested criteria below.

¹⁶ More on this will be said below as various criteria for canonicity are considered.

¹⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 268.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Second Phase: 2nd-3rd Centuries—Unifying the Two Testaments

After the passing of the Apostles, the Church's usage of the "second-class" New Testament books evened out with the core texts, and New Testament usage itself leveled out with that of the Old Testament. At this time, though, books were not being clearly distinguished as being "in" or "out" of the New Testament. "Still, no one thought of Scripture as forming a fixed collection."¹⁹ Rather, the major distinctions being made were books whose use was limited to specific rites (such as the instruction of catechumens).

Third Phase: 4th Century—Determining the Accepted Canon

It is not until A.D. 367, with Athanasius's *Festal Letter 39*, that a canonical statement is made that matches the traditional list. Athanasius, who was bishop of Alexandria, devoted most of his letter (which actually concerned the dating of Easter) to the limits of the New Testament:

Again, we must not hesitate to name the books of the New Testament. They are as follows:

Four gospels—according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, according to John.

Then after these the Acts of the Apostles and the seven so-called catholic epistles of the apostles, as follows: one of James, two of Peter, three of John and, after these, one of Jude.

Next to these are fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul, written in order as follows: First to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians, and after these to the Galatians and next that to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians and two to the Thessalonians and that to the Hebrews. Next are two to Timothy, one to Titus, and last the one to Philemon.

Moreover, John's Apocalypse.

These are the 'springs of salvation', so that one who is thirsty may be satisfied with the oracles which are in them. In these alone is the teaching of true religion proclaimed as good news. Let no one add to these or take anything from them.²⁰

¹⁹ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 50. It is good to bear in mind at this point that even the Hebrew canon was still being debated amongst the Jews in the 1st century (see Bruce, *Canon*, ch. 2).

²⁰ Bruce, *Canon*, 209.

This was the first time that the term “canon” was used to specify the content of the New Testament, and it is the first to exactly match the current 27-book list. Even here, however, the Protestant sixty-six-book canon is not affirmed, nor are non-canonical writings excluded from use. Athanasius continues:

But for the sake of greater accuracy I must needs, as I write, add this: there are other books outside these, which are not indeed included in the canon, but have been appointed from the time of the fathers to be read to those who are recent converts to our company and wish to be instructed in the word of true religion. These are . . . the so-called *Teaching of the Apostles* and the *Shepherd*. But while the former are included in the canon and the latter are read [in church], no mention is to be made of the apocryphal works. They are the invention of heretics, who write according to their own will, and gratuitously assign and add to them dates so that, offering them as ancient writings, they may have an excuse for leading the simple astray.²¹

Although Athanasius is often cited for his New Testament list, it should be remembered that the apocryphal books listed here are not equivalent to the Roman Catholic Old Testament Apocrypha - Athanasius includes Baruch and others. Further, he excludes Esther. This list did not become the standard of the day – lists continued to be drawn up later, some differing from Athanasius (especially in the Eastern churches).²²

Ongoing: 5th-21st Centuries—Continuing to Debate the Canon

Although many theological matters became settled doctrines of orthodoxy in the first five centuries of the Church, no ecumenical council ever ruled on the contents of the New Testament canon.²³ The Third Synod of Carthage (A.D. 397) is often cited as a determining factor in the solidification of the New Testament canon. It was a local council, however, and its list was not adopted by the churches of the East. Allert lists several examples of canonical “fluidity” from

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gregory of Nazianzus rejected the Book of Revelation at this time and Amphilochius, another eastern bishop, rejected it (and questioned other epistles) as late as A.D. 397. See Bruce, *Canon*, 81, and Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 143.

²³ For a summary of the ecumenical councils see http://www.newadvent.org/library/almanac_14388a.htm.

the 5th century on. He notes that Westcott could find “no less than six different lists of the Scriptures” even into the 10th century.²⁴

The Reformation itself produced a new canon devoid of the Old Testament apocryphal books, showing that canon controversy did not end even in the first 1,500 years of Church history.²⁵ The debate was not merely over these books, however. Martin Luther’s famous rejection of *The Epistle of James* as “a right strawy epistle,”²⁶ and his questioning of the *antilegomena* (“disputed books”) is well known.²⁷ Nor was he alone. In his commentaries, John Calvin mentions conflicting opinions concerning the books of Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, and Jude.²⁸ Zwingli also questioned parts of the New Testament canon.²⁹ Even today, classical

²⁴ *A High View of Scripture?* 144. See Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), Appx. D. and [Http://www.bible-researcher.com/canon8.html](http://www.bible-researcher.com/canon8.html) for a list of over 20 canon lists from the first seven centuries. Sawyer also gives a brief but interesting historical survey of several candidates for canonicity throughout this time period. See also Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), pt. 3.

²⁵ Some might argue that a firm canon was not necessary in Roman Catholicism since authority of the Scriptures was not much higher than that of tradition. Once the Reformers affirmed sola scriptura a final decision on the ‘disputed books’ became necessary.

²⁶ D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), s.v. “James, Epistle of.”

²⁷ For Luther, “The epistle to the Hebrews he concluded was not the work of an Apostle. He doubted its teaching about the denial of repentance to apostates. James, the ‘Straw’ epistle, he also said was not written by an Apostle. He felt it clashed with the doctrine of justification by faith and had not the spirit of Christ. He considered Jude but an extract or copy of 2 Peter. He held the book of Revelation to be ‘neither apostolic nor prophetic.’ It had too many visions and too little of Christ. Luther did not actually omit the antilegomena from the Canon altogether. But in his own Bible he placed the four books last, and, in order to indicate his low view of them, he did not number them as he did the first twenty-three. At the same time, however, he had some praise for every one of the books. He recommended them all as valuable reading. And he left the question open whether anyone else wanted to receive them as canonical or not.” Gary P. Baumler, “The Canon—What Is The Import Of The Distinction Between The Canonical And Deuterocanonical (Antilegomena) Books?” (An Essay Presented at the Pastoral Conference, New Brunswick, New Jersey, November 4, 1970), 5.

²⁸ See the book introductions in John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

²⁹ “Zwingli objected only to the Apocalypse and made no doctrinal use of it, because he did not deem it an inspired book, written by the same John who wrote the fourth Gospel. Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. Vol. 7 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 29.

Lutheranism distinguishes the New Testament *homologoumena* from the *antilegomena*.³⁰ Even some Protestants / Evangelicals have seen fit to break the canon up into higher and lower (and truer and falsier) writings.³¹

Lest this be seen as a Protestant-based issue, it should be noted that “Luther’s opponent, Cardinal Cajetan, following Jerome, expressed doubts concerning the canonicity of Hebrews, James, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. Erasmus likewise expressed doubts concerning Revelation as well as the apostolicity of James, Hebrews and 2 Peter.”³² It was not until after the Reformation was under way that Rome codified its canon at Trent.³³

³⁰ See “Antilegomena” at <http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/>. The seven antilegomena are *Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation*. The distinction between books canonical (*homologoumena*) and deuterocanonical (*antilegomena*) apparently appeared for the first time in history in a printed document by Origen early in the third century. In the fourth century Eusebius divides the books into three categories: accepted books, disputed books, and rejected (spurious) books. See Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* 137-139.

³¹ D.A. Carson notes that some scholars “reject parts of the canon as unworthy, historically inaccurate, mutually contradictory or the like, and adopt only certain *parts* of the Scripture. The parts they accept constitute their ‘canon within the canon’. Of course, this . . . reduces in one way or another to the question of the truthfulness and authority of Scripture. Even some who lie more or less within the evangelical camp have now defended the position that the New Testament documents, for instance, do not provide us with any unified theology, but with a range of acceptable (yet at places mutually contradictory) *theologies*.” Emphasis in original. D.A. Carson, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 2000), 21.

³² M. James Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament,” *Grace Theological Journal* 11 (Spring, 2009): 45.

³³ “And it has thought it meet that a list of the sacred books be inserted in this decree, lest a doubt may arise in any one’s mind, which are the books that are received by this Synod. They are as set down here below: of the Old Testament: the five books of Moses, to wit, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Josue, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two of Paralipomenon, the first book of Esdras, and the second which is entitled Nehemias; Tobias, Judith, Esther, Job, the Davidical Psalter, consisting of a hundred and fifty psalms; the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Canticle of Canticles, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Isaias, Jeremias, with Baruch; Ezechiel, Daniel; the twelve minor prophets, to wit, Osee, Joel, Amos, Abdias, Jonas, Micheas, Nahum, Habacuc, Sophonias, Aggaeus, Zacharias, Malachias; two books of the Machabees, the first and the second. Of the New Testament: the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles written by Luke the Evangelist; fourteen epistles of Paul the apostle, (one) to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, (one) to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Philippians, to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, two to Timothy, (one) to Titus, to Philemon, to the Hebrews; two of Peter the apostle, three of John the apostle, one of the apostle James, one of Jude the apostle, and the Apocalypse of John the apostle. But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately condemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema.” Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), Vol. 2, 80-82.

Some Suggested Criteria for the Canon

Even taking the current New Testament canon for granted, the critical question can still be asked: Why these books and not others?³⁴ Schaff notes that, “Calvin clearly saw the inconsistency of giving the Church the right of determining the canon after denying her right of making an article of faith. He therefore placed the Canon on the authority of God who bears testimony to it through the voice of the Spirit in the hearts of the believer. The eternal and inviolable truth of God, he says, is not founded on the pleasure and judgment of men, and can be as easily distinguished as light from darkness, and white from black.”³⁵ This subjective criteria raises more questions than it answers and clearly cannot account for the historical facts surrounding the canonization process above.³⁶

Looking back through history many have made educated guesses about what criteria were considered by the Church as it determined the biblical canon. Some writers imply that the process was rather simple and straightforward. Walter Elwell, for example, states that:

The church ultimately accepted four Gospels as authoritative, no doubt because they could be traced back in some fashion to those who had actually been with Jesus. . . . Jesus’ authority was conferred during his lifetime to a specially chosen group of followers (the apostles). . . . The Book of Acts is a follow-up to what Jesus *began* to do and teach while he was on earth (Acts 1:1); it is a record of what Jesus *continues* to do and teach through his church, his body, guided by the Holy Spirit under the direction of the apostles. . . . Paul was counted as an apostle by the church even though he was not one of the Twelve. . . . Paul wrote many letters to the Gentile churches he founded; these

³⁴ Critics are not unaware of this issue, as seen by Bart Ehrman’s recent book, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁵ Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

³⁶ I am reminded of Robert Thomas’s claim that God gives believers “access to what may be called divinely enabled objectivity” with regard to hermeneutical presuppositions. This is allegedly shown to be the case by the “constancy of church doctrine [that] has prevailed through the centuries.” This is a rather startling claim given the history of Church doctrine. See Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 53.

letters [a]long with the other writings, they were collected and considered authoritative.³⁷

Most, however, recognize that the process was not so simple. In his more robust presentation, Roger Nicole considers seven criteria: (1) Apostolicity, (2) Orthodoxy, (3) Christocentricity, (4) Inspiration, (5) The Testimony Of The Holy Spirit To The Individual Christian, (6) The Authority Of The Church, and (7) The Witness Of The Holy Spirit Given Corporately To God's People And Made Manifest By A Nearly Unanimous Acceptance Of The NT Canon In Christian Churches.³⁸ F. F. Bruce considers six: (1) Apostolic Authority, (2) Antiquity, (3) Orthodoxy, (4) Catholicity, (5) Traditional Use, and (6) Inspiration.³⁹ Norman Geisler and Bill Nix narrow the conditions to positive answers to five questions: (1) Was the book written by a prophet of God? (2) Was the writer confirmed by acts of God? (3) Did the message tell the truth about God? (4) Does it come with the power of God? and (5) Was it accepted by the people of God?⁴⁰ Richard Swinburne lists only three factors involved in determining the canon: (1) Conformity to Christian Tradition, (2) Apostolicity, and (3) Widespread acceptance by the Church.⁴¹ In a rather

³⁷ Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), "New Testament, Introduction."

³⁸ Nicole, Roger. "The Canon of the New Testament." *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no.2 (June, 1997): 200-207.

³⁹ Bruce, *Canon*, ch. 21.

⁴⁰ Norman L. Geisler, and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), ch. 12. In the book's first edition, Samuel J. Schultz had the following to say: "Refreshingly significant is the attitude reflected throughout these pages expressed in the assertion that 'Christ is the key to canonicity.' Modern scholarship that gives serious consideration to the attitude and teaching of Jesus concerning these problems related to the Bible deserves commendation."

⁴¹ Swinburne, Richard. "Authority of Scripture, Tradition, and the Church." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, Eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12. Note that Swinburne believes these to be Bruce's criteria.

surprising break from standard canon scholarship, James White lists only one criterion for inclusion in the canon: Inspiration.⁴²

Before considering these criteria an important distinction must be made between the definition of the canon and its determination. As Geisler and Nix note: “inspiration . . . concerns *what* God did, namely, that He breathed out (spirated) the Scriptures. . . . canonization . . . relates to the question of *which* books God inspired. Inspiration indicates how the Bible received its *authority*, whereas canonization tells how the Bible received its *acceptance*.”⁴³ For the purposes of this paper the standard Protestant / Evangelical view will be accepted, viz., that the Bible is the written word of God and that this is a necessary condition for any writing to be considered canonical. The question under consideration here will be how this canon is recognized as being such. How the above criteria fare with regard to history and theology will be considered below.

Evaluation of Suggested Criteria

From the above lists an immediate problem arises. If it is actually known how the canon was determined, how can the lists not match? R. Laird Harris believed that there is room for differing principles for determining the same canon: “Several differing views concerning the principle of determination of the canon—views not necessarily exclusive—have been held through the centuries, and there is room for some differences of opinion on this point.”⁴⁴ This is an

⁴² White distinguishes between what calls canon¹ and canon² – the former being the canon as God knows it and the latter as man discovers it. This is a useful distinction that few would seem to question. His explanation for man’s discovery of canon² is that it is based on “God’s purpose in giving Scripture.” He does this to avoid giving the Church any infallible authority, but it fails to explain how the Church gained this providential assurance without gaining it for anything else that it did in the same time frame, nor how the Church came to distinguish canonical writings from non-canonical writings that it considered inspired. Compare White, *Scripture Alone*, ch. 5 with Allert, *High View of Scripture?* 58-65.

⁴³ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 202–203.

⁴⁴ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1969), Preface.

important point – there is no “canon” of principles for canonical determination. Dogmatic statements on the process should be suspect without adequate proof. As Ellen Flesseman-van Leer has argued, “those who accept the traditional canon of scripture today cannot legitimately defend it with arguments which played no part in its formation.”⁴⁵

This warning is important, for “the conservative American evangelical apologetic for the shape of the New Testament canon has been historically the weakest link in its bibliology. Arguments for the shape of the canon have been built upon unexamined theological assumptions and historical inaccuracies.”⁴⁶ With all the apologetic energy devoted to proving the *accuracy* and *inspiration* of the Bible, not much has been left over for its *identification*.⁴⁷

Inspiration

Geisler and Nix assert that men do not determine canon; they merely discover it. The key to this discovery is recognition of a book’s inspiration by God⁴⁸ (James White follows the same basic view).⁴⁹ Geisler and Nix, as seen above, proposed five criteria for this discovery, but, “it should be noted that these five principles involve assumption on their part. There is no

⁴⁵ Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, “Prinzipien der Sammlung und Ausscheidung bei der Bildung des Kanons,” *ZTK* 61 (1964), 419; in Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 275.

⁴⁶ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 29.

⁴⁷ For example, in one popular apologetics text (Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004]), approximately four out of its fifteen chapters argue for the reliability of the New Testament, yet only three pages (367–370) are devoted to the canon question (one of which is a chart). Another example would be Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2008) which has four pages on biblical inspiration and less than one on the canon- much of which is simply historical description. Lest the reader misunderstand the implication - this much space is unusually *large* for popular apologetics books. Many do not discuss or argue the issue at all.

⁴⁸ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 133.

⁴⁹ White, *Scripture Alone*, ch. 5

documentation from patristic sources that these principles were *consciously* employed.”⁵⁰ Not only are the specific steps not found in patristic writings, but the idea of inspiration was far more widely used, that is, many non-canonical writings were considered “inspired” in the early Church (e.g., Clement claims “inspiration” for his epistle to the Corinthians).⁵¹

More importantly, the criterion is simply not useful to solving the practical question of which books are inspired (the same error James White makes). *What* the canon is does not necessarily tell us *how* to identify it. No material definition of the canon can do justice to explaining and defending its formal development. At best the criterion ends up arguing in a circle. Nicole says it well: “If this principle were as simple as it is thought to be by its advocates it is difficult to understand why it took the Church some 300 years to make up its mind on the exact list of NT books and why the problem of the OT Apocrypha still plagues some of us to this day.”⁵²

Apostolicity

M. James Sawyer notes that, “Conservative evangelical understanding of the criteria by which the New Testament books were recognized as canonical follows the basic outline laid down by B. B. Warfield and his fellow Princetonians, Charles and A. A. Hodge, over a century ago. These criteria focused exclusively upon the question of apostolicity.”⁵³ Following this tradition, Geisler and Nix write that, “Apostles, by their very office, were accredited spokesmen

⁵⁰ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 36.

⁵¹ For example, “the things we have written through the Holy Spirit (γεγράμμενοις διὰ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος)” (1 Clement 63:2). For multiple examples of this sort of usage see Allert, *High View of Scripture?* 58-66.

⁵² Nicole, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 203.

⁵³ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 31.

for God. It was they whom Jesus promised: ‘The Holy Spirit . . . will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you’ (John 14:26) and the Spirit of truth . . . will guide you into all the truth (John 16:13).’’⁵⁴

There are several issues with the use of apostolicity as a criterion for canonicity. First there is the relatively minor issue of “lost” apostolic books. This is easily countered, first because they may not be lost at all,⁵⁵ and second because apostolicity may only be a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for canonicity.⁵⁶ Geisler and Nix note that in these cases an additional criterion would be required, and “the most likely candidate for such a further condition would be *acceptance by the people of God* of the books they deemed of value to the broader Christian community.”⁵⁷ Thus, appeal to tradition might be required.

Second, and more importantly, a strict reading of the verses cited by Geisler and Nix cannot account for several New Testament books such as Mark, Luke, James, Jude, and (possibly) Hebrews, for none of these books were written by those to whom Jesus made these promises.⁵⁸ The solution offered is to note these writers’ relationships to the Apostles. For

⁵⁴ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 212. Note that Geisler and Nix’s criterion of miraculous confirmation is not only moot for this discussion, but clearly cannot be used for several books. Further, their claim (on page 217) that “there is no evidence that any such special *gift* of miracles has existed since the death of the apostles. The immediate successors of the apostles did not claim new revelation, nor did they claim these special confirmatory gifts” is questionable at best. Early apologists specifically referenced miracles (even revivifications), as evidence of apostolicity, Polycarp was said to have been miraculously unharmed by fire, and Papias related a story of revivification as well (e.g., http://www.catholic.com/library/Do_Miracles_Still_Occur.asp).

⁵⁵ This is Geisler and Nix’s preferred solution. On the other hand, Nicole defines this criterion in precisely these terms: “For a NT book to be canonical it is necessary and sufficient that it should have been written by an apostle.” Nicole, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 200.

⁵⁶ See Pauline book introductions (esp. Corinthians and Colossians) in Norman L. Geisler, *Popular Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

⁵⁷ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 214.

⁵⁸ Even if Hebrews was written by Paul or one of his close associates, Paul was not technically given a specific promise regarding his inspiration. However, Peter calls Paul’s writings “Scripture” in 2 Peter 3:16 (assuming this book was written by the Apostle Peter). Lest this point seem minor, it is the only direct biblical evidence we have to prove Paul’s inspiration and yet this very book was one of the more hotly contended in the

example, Warfield “argued that *apostolicity* was a somewhat wider concept than strictly apostolic authorship . . . but imposition by the apostles The practical effect of this subtle distinction is to allow for the inclusion of books such as Mark, Luke, James, Jude and Hebrews which were not actually penned by the apostles, but were, according to tradition, written under apostolic sanction.” This foundational issue might seem to be a problem for *sola scriptura* adherents, however, for some of these relationships are not reported in any New Testament texts, and must therefore come from tradition.

Third, even for the apostolic books, some are anonymous (all the Gospels and Hebrews), and several have been seen as having questionable authorship for most of the Church’s life (e.g., 2 Peter, 2-3 John). Roger Nicole notes, “The canonicity of a book would stand or fall with an acceptance of the authenticity of authorship, according to evangelical persuasion. Now it is a plain matter of record that this authenticity has been challenged and rejected by many Biblical critics.”⁵⁹ So once again, traditional history must be consulted.

Considerations such as the above led Sawyer to conclude that, “Separated by nearly two millennia from the autographs, we cannot rely upon such means as the known signature of the apostle Paul to assure a book’s authenticity. Hence, we cannot use apostolicity as the means by which we are *ultimately* assured of the shape of the canon.”⁶⁰ Sawyer concludes from his study that it is the inner witness of the Spirit that must be determinative. This criterion will be considered next.

early Church precisely on the issue of authorship. If the ancient Church was unsure about 2 Peter’s “canonicity,” then its final conclusions would seem to be less reliable with the passage of time.

⁵⁹ Nicole, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 200.

⁶⁰ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 47.

Inner Witness of the Spirit

R. Laird Harris “follows Warfield closely in insisting upon apostolic authorship as *the* criterion for New Testament canonicity. . . . [But] goes beyond Warfield by denying that the Reformation principle of the witness of the Spirit is a valid test of canonicity of a book of Scripture.”⁶¹ Sawyer sees this principle as foundational. “The starting point of canonicity must be a recognition that at the most basic level it is the risen Lord Himself who is ultimately the canon of His church. . . . It is also the risen Christ who causes His church to accept the canon and to recognize it by means of the witness of the Holy Spirit.”⁶²

Yet Sawyer admits that this does not “give us the right to identify absolutely the canon which comes from Jesus Christ (i.e., the material canon) with the canon of the church (i.e., the formal canon).”⁶³ After detailing how he believes this process to have taken place,⁶⁴ Sawyer concludes that, “Focusing on the principle of the witness of the Spirit for assurance in canonical questions introduced a subjectivity factor which rendered the question of canon, in the absolute sense, undefinable.”⁶⁵ While this proposal does inject “an uncomfortable subjective element into

⁶¹ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 34.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Viz.*, (following Briggs’ method of canon determination): “First, the logical order began with the human testimony as probably evidence to the divine origin of Scripture. This testimony brought the individual to esteem the Scriptures highly. Next, when he turned to the pages of Scripture itself, they exerted an influence upon his soul. Finally, the divine testimony convinced him of the extent of the truth of God, at which point he shared in the consensus of the church.” Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 50. Sawyer notes that the criteria used by Geisler and Nix “have a great affinity with Briggs’ threefold program. However, there is one crucial difference. For Geisler and Nix the question is strictly historical, how did the ancient church reach its conclusions? . . . [But] How are we today assured of the shape of the canon?” Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 51.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

the process,”⁶⁶ Sawyer believes it “provides a viable apologetic as to how we can bridge the gap between the relativity of historical knowledge and the certainty of faith.”⁶⁷

This is certainly in line with Protestant sensibilities. The Westminster Confession states that, “full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority [of Scripture], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.”⁶⁸ However, the same confession also gives weight to the Church (see I. V.).

One issue raised here concerns the fact that while individuals might receive this inner witness, no such thing is promised in Scripture itself. Thus, if the principle is accepted it must come from the either personal special revelation or the [Protestant] Church’s authority. But reliance on Church authority for the canon is the very thing the Protestant wishes to avoid.⁶⁹ Further, to serve as any kind of apologetic, subjective tests such as these should be avoided.⁷⁰ Finally, Geisler and Nix give their own historical critique to this criterion (which they might be seen to share): “Because a book must come with edifying power in order to be considered canonical, some books (such as the Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes) were the subject of

⁶⁶ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 51.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith, I, V.

⁶⁹ Sawyer notes that, “It might be argued that the common apologetic for canon ultimately leads a person to one of two alternatives, a certainty based upon what amounts to be “assured results of higher criticism,” or the infallibility of the church. For the evangelical Protestant neither of these alternatives is ultimately satisfying.” Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 46.

⁷⁰ And in this case, it might be proven to fail. One objector to this idea proposes the following test: “If . . . we set various candidate texts, like books or passages from the New Testament, apocryphal works, or revered writings from the early Church Fathers, in front of new Christians who have the Spirit but have never read the Bible, they would all pick out the same books or passages as canonical. . . . [Yet] Something close to this hypothetical test has already been run. In the early centuries of Christian history, the many faithful Christians in close communion with the Holy Spirit, and who did not yet have a determined canon for their Bible, did not conclude that the Protestant 66-book canon is correct.” Tom Brown, “The Canon Question” <http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/01/the-canon-question/> (Accessed March 29, 2010), 4.

occasional doubts.”⁷¹ These doubts were finally settled, once again, by the Church. Nicole summarizes the issue nicely when he says that the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the individual Christian,

is not in fact the way in which the canon was formed. As individuals we do not receive a large bag of separate Bible passages out of which we should draw, as one draws a lottery number, in order to see which ones are confirmed by the Holy Spirit. Rather we are presented with a bound book, and it is as we read in the book that the Holy Spirit awakens in us the perception that this is God’s Word.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* is misinterpreted if it is construed to assert that the canon is the result of an individual perception since in the second paragraph of the same first chapter a list of the canonical books is presented as binding on all believers.

In the way in which our Lord and the apostles referred to the OT it is clear that the appeal was to an accredited collection of books, not to individual passages privately perceived as divinely inspired.⁷²

Doctrinal Orthodoxy

Sawyer notes that, “the church was founded not upon the apostolic documents, but rather upon the apostolic doctrine.”⁷³ Here again, however, the definition does not necessarily yield the process. Nicole states, “The early Church demonstrates that it was not easy to handle this criterion, for the West had some difficulty in acknowledging Hebrews, and the East long entertained reservations about Revelation.”⁷⁴ Doctrinal disputes with Marcion, the Gnostics, and the Montanists are just a few of the most well known of those which produced problems for the canon. Not only were the heretics “Bible thumpers,” resulting in the need to appeal to tradition

⁷¹ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 228-229.

⁷² Nicole, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 203.

⁷³ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 40.

⁷⁴ Nicole, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 201-202.

over against their spurious interpretations,⁷⁵ but in some cases it was canonical books that were brought into question.⁷⁶

Even after the first millennium debate continued. “Christocentricity [*sic*] as advocated by Martin Luther,” for example, is said by Nicole to be, “grounded in the correct observation that the whole Bible as a redemptive book has Jesus Christ as its center.”⁷⁷ Nicole follows up with an example of the problem of this criterion: “Luther himself committed a very serious blunder by advocating the exclusion from the canon of Esther, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs and the epistle of James. Fortunately the Lutheran Church has not followed suit.”⁷⁸

Geisler and Nix note that “Historically and uniformly, Jude and James have been vindicated and their canonicity recognized, but only when their teaching had been harmonized with the rest of the body of Scripture.”⁷⁹ Of course this harmonization occurred within the Church’s theological tradition.

A final problem is that this criterion seems to be a case of circular reasoning. If the canon was determined by its orthodoxy, this had to result from its agreement with either itself (i.e., other canonical books), or with some other rule of faith. If the former (as Geisler and Nix suggest⁸⁰), then the question simply gets pushed back another step—for it requires an already-established canon in order to know which other books form the rule against which orthodoxy can

⁷⁵ See Christopher A. Hall, “What Evangelicals and Liberals Can Learn from the Church Fathers.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 1 (March 2006): 82-97.

⁷⁶ See Allert, *High View of Scripture?* 88-103.

⁷⁷ Nicole, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 202.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 227–228.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 226-228.

be measured. Appeal to the Old Testament brings up several issues: How was this canon determined? How are Jewish theologians to be answered who claim that the New Testament does indeed conflict with the Old Testament? Further, this forms a negative test at best that would not prove useful in many cases. If, on the other hand, the rule of faith is found outside the Bible then tradition, once again, must be invoked.

Tradition / Providence

Some of the internal issues surrounding each of the above putative criteria have already been noted, however two major external issues remain. First, the Church did not list these criteria and then go about passing each book through a “canon filter.” Concerning the above criteria, Herman Ridderbos’s comments seem appropriate:

the church did not begin by making formal decisions as to what was valid as canon, nor did it begin by setting specific criteria of canonicity As their artificiality indicates, these arguments are a posteriori in character. To hold that the church was led to accept these writings by such *criteria*, in fact speak here of a *criteria canonicitais* is to go too far. It is rather clear that we have to do with more or less successful attempts to cover with arguments what had already been fixed for a long time and for the fixation of which, such reasoning or such criteria had never been employed.⁸¹

Second, even if it did the problem remains as to how to determine their authority, for if the canon is discovered by principles within the Bible then it is circular, and if by the Church (whatever its criteria) then it is not “biblical,” but “traditional.”

Bruce Metzger’s conclusion is that, “Patristic writers would sometimes appeal in a more or less reasoned manner to specific criteria bearing on canonicity One of them involved theological appreciation of the content of a given book, while the other two were based on historical considerations bearing on its authorship and general acceptance among the churches. A

⁸¹ Herman Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963), 45-46.

basic prerequisite for canonicity was conformity to what was called the ‘rule of faith’ . . . that is, the congruity of a given document with the basic Christian tradition recognized as normative by the Church.”⁸² After surveying and critiquing several different views of canon formation, Sawyer concludes that, “If one argues that the individual writings are canonical because of their divine inspiration, then he would logically see the canon as a collection of authoritative books. If, on the other hand, one views the canon in the sense of a completed list to which nothing can be added, he would tend to see the canon as an authoritative collection. However, I believe that at this point, to be consistent, one would have to admit that the authority of the *collection* is imposed by ecclesiastical authority.”⁸³ Even Geisler and Nix admit that “Thus, the seal of canonicity was whether or not the book was accepted by the people of God.”⁸⁴

Appeal to tradition will often produce red flags in the minds of Protestants / Evangelicals. “Evangelicals insist upon the primacy of the written documents of Scripture over and against all human authority. However, in so doing they tend to overlook the fact that other authority did in fact exist in the ancient church, particularly the authority of Jesus Christ and His apostles.”⁸⁵ This is simply an historical fact: the Church existed at least a decade before the earliest book of the New Testament (James or Matthew) existed, and four to six *decades* until the last New Testament book was completed (Revelation’s date being between the late 60’s or 90’s). So for any in the Church to ignore the formative years of the Christian faith is to step into perilous waters.

⁸² Metzger, Bruce M. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 251.

⁸³ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 39.

⁸⁴ Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 229.

⁸⁵ Sawyer, “Evangelicals and the Canon,” 40.

This notion is not simply an authoritative fiat. God's sovereignty and providential guidance together guarantee that He "will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18, ESV). Ridderbos notes the distinction when he writes,

Within the history of Protestant dogma as well, certain utterances have been made that appear to imply ecclesiastical infallibility with respect to the acceptance of the canon. It has been argued . . . that the church received a special gift of the Holy Spirit to enable it to establish the canon by infallibly distinguishing inspired from noninspired writings. . . . Another Protestant viewpoint is that the church's consensus about the canon arose of itself and so is the clearest proof that in establishing the canon, the church was guided by *special providence*; history itself, so to speak, offers the evidence for the canonicity of the New Testament. That consensus of the church, or rather that absolute authority acquired by the writings of the New Testament everywhere and without dispute, is then thought to guarantee the canonicity of these [New Testament] writings.⁸⁶

Protestants / Evangelicals need not agree with Rome (or Constantinople, or Egypt) concerning how God's promise to protect His Church will take place in order to agree that it will happen. Certainly if the Church can be trusted for determining orthodoxy and heresy in the first five centuries it can be trusted with the Bible itself.⁸⁷

Which Tradition?

While Sawyer warns that "while it is proper to argue that divine providence *did* superintend the collection of the New Testament canon, we cannot equate providence with the belief of the majority. If this were true, we should all be Roman Catholics today!"⁸⁸ Protestants /

⁸⁶ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1988), 34. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁷ Although for the Protestant / Evangelical this might very well add another issue, for it might seem that, "it would be *ad hoc* to claim that the "church" infallibly established the canon through widespread acceptance while otherwise being unable to arrive at any infallible conclusions, without a principled basis for affirming infallibility in the one case and denying it in all others. If the Church was not infallibly preserved from error in its early teachings on ecclesiology, iconography, justification, etc., there is no reason to believe it was so preserved from error when its canon came into widespread acceptance. To maintain otherwise would be a textbook case of special pleading." Tom Brown, "The Canon Question," 17.

⁸⁸ Sawyer, "Evangelicals and the Canon," 45.

Evangelicals often couch their issues with Roman Catholicism in terms of “Bible vs. Tradition.”

But if tradition simply includes anything outside the Bible then a satisfactory solution to the canon issue seems impossible.

Nicole proposes “several fallacies in the Roman Catholic argument: (1) The OT existed before the NT Church. (2) The Church is under the authority of the Word and has no authority over the Word. (3) The Church’s authority is at most designative, not constitutive. . . . (4) The rights of the eastern churches appear to have been overlooked in this argument.”⁸⁹ These arguments are not uncommon, but (1) is questionable, since the Old Testament canon was still being debated at Jamnia in the first century.⁹⁰ Criterion (2) is acknowledged by all (even Rome⁹¹) and so cannot adjudicate the issue. Finally, (3) is based on the definition / recognition distinction already dealt with above (and also acknowledged by Rome).⁹²

Regulei Fidei vs. Sola Scriptura

Issue (4), however, is a serious problem for Roman Catholic claims. Vincent of Lérins makes the famous statement of catholicity: “We hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.”⁹³ One writer notes the following dilemma:

The measure of universal (or at least widespread) acceptance does not tell us which Christians, and from what times, get a vote in this election which is used as “evidence” to prop up confidence in the Protestant canon. It cannot explain why the views of Jerome or Origen should count toward ‘widespread recognition,’ whereas the views of Augustine,

⁸⁹ Nicole, “The Canon of the New Testament,” 204.

⁹⁰ While it is true that Jesus Christ referred to Old Testament *sections* (e.g., “the Law and the Prophets” – Mt. 7:12; Lk. 16:16), “as nearly as we can tell there was no canon of Scripture in Second Temple Judaism. That is, before 70 C.E.” James C. VanderKam, “Questions of Canon Viewed through the Dead Sea Scrolls” in McDonald Sanders, *The Canon Debate*, 92.

⁹¹ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 80-86.

⁹² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 120.

⁹³ Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitory* 2.4 in Allert, *High View of Scripture?* 80n.44.

or the councils of Hippo and Carthage should not. It cannot explain without resort to ad hoc stipulation why widespread acceptance by the fourth century (or some other early time) is authoritative while the consensus of today's 1.5 billion Catholic and Orthodox Christians regarding the deuterocanon is not.⁹⁴

However, even if one were to excuse Protestantism and its successors from consideration, both Eastern and Oriental Orthodoxy remain. One might, for example, agree to infallibility or supervening providence to the Ecumenical Church of the first thousand years without having to affirm either to any of its direct historical branches of the last thousand years.

Nicole offers an "explanation that this near-unanimity is due to the Holy Spirit's action and is not merely a fortuitous coincidence. This approach provides a ready answer to the question of the canon: 'Ask any Christian community.'"⁹⁵ That is, the Universal (Catholic) Church (past, present, and future) provides the answers to what it believes. It just is the case that the canon is reflective of the Church's beliefs regardless of how it came about historically.

Nicole notes several positive features of this view:

1. This approach provides us with a relatively simple answer as to whether the canon remains open or is closed. The likelihood of an almost unanimous acceptance of additional books is indeed minimal.
2. The strength of this criterion increases as years pass by. . . . since the year AD 200 there has been consensus on the 20 other books, known as *homologoumena* ("agreed upon").
3. This criterion accommodates many of the factors that are good in the criteria previously discussed: (1) All NT writings are apostolic in the broad sense of the term. (2) They surely are orthodox. (3) They are centered in Christ and his work. (4) They are indeed inspired. (5) The Holy Spirit does bear witness to them, although not merely to individuals seeking to determine the canon. (6) They are officially endorsed by the churches.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Tom Brown, "The Canon Question," 18.

⁹⁵ Nicole, "The Canon of the New Testament," 204.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 204-206. "Many confessions give them specific endorsement, including the canons of the council of Trent, Philaret's *Longer Catechism of the Russian Church*, the *Gallic Confession*, the *Belgic Confession*, the 39

What this view does for the Protestant is to give the early Church its due respect while avoiding the necessity of accepting any present branch as being universally authoritative / infallible over all other traditions.

The Church of Rome appears here not as our authority for the canon but as one of the churches whose position reflects the influence of the Holy Spirit. He is the authority, not the Church. Following the type of reasoning of the objector, one would have to say that our view of the canon of the OT puts us under the authority of the synagogue. This is manifestly absurd. . . . We receive as canonical Scriptures of the OT all the books that have been transmitted to us, under that title, by the universal consent of the Jewish people, to whom the oracles of God were entrusted under the Lord's guidance. And we receive equally as canonical Scriptures of the NT all the books that, under the guidance of the same Providence, have been transmitted to us as such by the universal consent of the churches of the Christian world.⁹⁷

Bruce seems to agree: "By an act of faith the Christian reader today may identify the New Testament, as it has been received, with the entire 'tradition of Christ.' But confidence in such an act of faith will be strengthened if the same faith proves to have been exercised by Christians in other places and at other times—if it is in line with the traditional 'criteria of canonicity.' And there is no reason to exclude the bearing of other lines of evidence on any position that is accepted by faith."⁹⁸

It has been objected that "a canon criterion that judges the canon based on evidence external to Scripture violates *sola scriptura*, or the Reformed assumption that necessarily accompanies *sola scriptura* that whatever authoritatively testifies to the canonicity of Scripture must be more authoritative than Scripture, by placing extra-Biblical evidence effectively above

Articles, the Irish Articles of Religion, the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration, the Second London Baptist Confession and the Confession of the Waldenses." Nicole, "The Canon of the New Testament," 205.

⁹⁷ Nicole, "The Canon of the New Testament," 206.

⁹⁸ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 283.

the Bible, which is to be the believer's sole infallible authority."⁹⁹ This is a healthy reminder of the self-referential problems that arise if *sola scriptura* (i.e., that Scripture is the ultimate or final authority) is confused with what Keith Mathison calls *solo scriptura* (i.e., that Scripture is the *only* authority).¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The testimony of several converts out of Protestantism / Evangelicalism includes appeals to certainty in doctrine and practice.¹⁰¹ For the Protestant / Evangelical, certainty is said to come from the Scriptures. Naturally, this means that the contents of the Bible itself must be certain. General arguments for "the Bible's" trustworthiness will not suffice to ground this certainty. Often the question of the canon is not even raised, and therefore once it is, the Roman answer can accrue an existential power that is difficult to resist. These must, of course, include certitude as to the canon issue. So long as Church traditional authority is based on universal consent guided by God's Providence, it can be assured of certainty in necessary issues by God's Sovereignty.

⁹⁹ Tom Brown, "The Canon Question," 22. For the most elaborate critique of Sola Scriptura from a Roman Catholic perspective see Robert A. Sungen, *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Santa Barbara: Queenship Publishing, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ See Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, ch.s 8-9. Geisler's response ("A Critical Review of The Shape of Sola Scriptura by Keith Mathison") largely undercuts the authoritative status of universal tradition, and to that degree the problems for the formation of the canon remain.

¹⁰¹ Two recent examples include Scott and Kimberly Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993); Norman L. Geisler and Joshua M. Betancourt, *Is Rome the True Church?* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2008), ch. 8 [Note: Betancourt converted to Roman Catholicism just after the book went to print].

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