

# THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON: HISTORICAL PROCESS AND SPIRIT'S WITNESS

NICOLAAS APPEL, S.J.

*St. Louis University, School of Divinity*

REFLECTION ON the canon of Scripture is peculiarly attractive. Is it not precisely this collection of books to which all the Christian traditions hark back for the source of their witness in our world? These books are closely connected with God's word and God's Spirit. This is a basic agreement, however different the ways of evaluating the proper character of this bond. In these books, in the canon of "Holy" Scripture, we are touching the heart of the Christian mystery.

But there is still another reason why historical and theological reflection on the canon is so attractive. High as our speculations may be, they are forced again and again to come down to something very concrete and tangible, to a quantitative "object," which is in and from our world, to something which is within our grasp, to documents which belong to our human history. The mystery of "Holy" Scripture is clothed in the human dimensions of this world.

This collection of books is the common heritage of all the Christian traditions. It is well known that since the sixteenth-century Reformation there are some differences as to the exact extent of the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> These controversies, however, are of minor importance. On the other hand, as to the New Testament boundaries, there are no differences. A glance at any edition of the Bible convinces one immediately. Indeed, all the Christian traditions revere the same mysterious collection of Scriptures. The Reformed confessional writings contain a clear statement concerning the canon of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> In the Catholic Counter Reformation, the Council of Trent professed that it faithfully received the centuries-old traditional collection of sacred books.<sup>3</sup> Even in the Lutheran tradition there are clear signs pointing at a confession of the canon. It is true that in the Lutheran confessional writings we do not

<sup>1</sup> Cf. O. Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (3rd ed.; Tübingen, 1964) pp. 757-73; P. Katz, "The Old Testament Canon in Palestine and Alexandria," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 47 (1956) 191-217; A. C. Sundberg, "The Old Testament in the Early Church: A Study of Canon," *Harvard Theological Review* 51 (1958) 205-26; *id.*, *The Old Testament of the Early Church* (Cambridge, 1964). For a summary cf. N. Appel, *Kanon und Kirche: Die Kanonkrise im heutigen Protestantismus als kontroverstheologisches Problem* (Paderborn, 1964) pp. 344-50.

<sup>2</sup> W. Niesel (ed.), *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (3rd ed.; Zollikon-Zürich, 1938) pp. 66-67, 120.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Trent, *Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis* (DS 1501-5 [783-84]).

find any "list" of Bible books. But the famous formula *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) would not have been meaningful if it did not refer to a concrete well-known collection. In the introductions to the books and the epistles, as we find them in his translation of the Bible, Luther is not afraid to criticize the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Book of Revelation, and the Epistles of James and Jude. But he did not exclude them from his translation.<sup>4</sup> Actually, Luther's translation became a confession of the canon in the Lutheran tradition.

Thus all the Christian traditions receive the same exclusive canon of Scripture. Is the evaluation of the canon also the same? Until recently there was an unbridgeable gap between the Catholic and the Reformation evaluation of this closed collection. The difference seemed clear and easy to formulate: Scripture and tradition on the Catholic side, Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) on the other side. But modern reflection on the community of mankind as a community on its way, as a community in history, has made us more careful. We have arrived at the generally accepted conclusion that Scripture, as it concretely exists and functions, comes to us from the past in a long historical process of handing on and taking over. In brief, Scripture comes to us in a process of tradition. Scripture and tradition, in one way or another, belong together.

The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order (Montreal, 1963) treated at great length the relation between Scripture, tradition, and traditions.<sup>5</sup> In the report of Section II, it says:

Our starting point is that we are all living in a tradition which goes back to our Lord and has its roots in the Old Testament, and are all indebted to that tradition inasmuch as we have received the revealed truth, the Gospel, through its being transmitted from one generation to another. Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Tradition taken in this sense is actualized in the preaching of the Word, in the administration of the Sacraments and worship, in Christian teaching and theology, and in mission and witness to Christ by the lives of the members of the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Vatican II did not petrify old rigid positions but wanted to give modern theological views a fair chance.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Weimarer Lutherausgabe, Deutsche Bibel* 7, 344-45 (Hebrews), 384-87 (James and Jude), 404 (Revelation).

<sup>5</sup> *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, ed. P. C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer (New York, 1964) pp. 50-60 (Section Reports, Section 2: "Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions").

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit. To the successors of the apostles, sacred tradition hands on in its full purity God's word, which was entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. Thus, led by the light of the Spirit of truth, these successors can in their preaching preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently, it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence. Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is committed to the Church.<sup>7</sup>

It is in a living tradition of faith and understanding that the canon of Scripture is handed down from generation to generation. The mystery of Scripture and the faith of the Christian community go hand in hand. The canon of Scripture and human history cannot be separated. But still another highly important dimension in their mutual relation must be recognized. Human history played an important part in the *formation* of the canon.

The collection of Old Testament and New Testament writings was not defined and ultimately closed by a council of prophets or apostles. This occurred much later in the history of the Church. The early Christian community, prompted by a spontaneous need and forced by external circumstances, wondered where it could find the reliable "apostolic" writings. After a long historical process, the apostolic writings finally formed a closed collection. Nothing could be added to it any more or taken away from it. The process of receiving and finally closing the New Testament writings was different from the process concerning the Old Testament. In this study we focus on the New Testament.

In the historical process of growing insight, not everything was evident from the very beginning. For a while some local churches had doubts about a few New Testament writings. Do these doubts detract from the reliability of our present canon? Does this human struggle for certitude also have a theological meaning? In other words, does this human struggle tell us something about the essence of the canon itself? Or, is not everything in our present canon equally reliable? Should we try to uncover within the historical canon the "authentic" canon? Should we

<sup>7</sup> Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei verbum*) nos. 9-10, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott and J. Gallagher (New York, 1966) p. 117.

formulate a canon within the canon? Recent studies might help us to a deeper theological reflection on the meaning of the canon of Scripture.

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON AND SALVATION HISTORY

Some years ago G. C. Berkouwer published a thorough two-volume theological study on Scripture.<sup>8</sup> The canon, he says, is a phenomenon which developed out of a long historical process. Is it legitimate, Berkouwer asks, in connection with this historical aspect, to talk about a "canon," about the "authority" of Scripture? This question dominates theological discussions even today (pp. 83-84).

In the acceptance of the books the community played a responsible part. There was a direct relation between the responsibility of the community and its experience of the power and content of these writings. Theology has to reflect on the remarkable relationship between human and ecclesiastical considerations on the one hand, and the canon as norm and authority on the other. For immediately the question arises: Does not the idea of a canon radically exclude every human judgment as a criterion? The actual acceptance of the Scriptures by the faithful community was also influenced by human motives. The word of God reaches man in his own human world, in his history, and in his human witness. In our world, with its many voices and its many words, we cannot escape the need to distinguish as in Th 2:13: "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers" (pp. 85-91).

In some theological reflections solutions are being proposed which try to get around the human aspects. The uncertain elements, which are found in the historical process of the formation of the canon, are simply put aside as irrelevant (p. 95).

The orthodox Protestant tradition connected the historical process with a very special form of God's providence (*providentia specialissima*), or with a peculiar divine activity concerning the canon (*actio Dei circa canonem*), or with a clear witness of the Holy Spirit in man's heart (*testimonium internum sancti Spiritus*). God's providence and the witness of God's Spirit are directly related to the results of the historical process. All the uncertain elements in what went on before are not important any more. It is after the event that one tries to find a kind of authority which guarantees the actual canon. The background of the proposed solutions is clear enough: they want to exclude absolutely any human creativity in the formation of the canon (pp. 93-96).

<sup>8</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift* (2 vols.; Kampen, 1966, 1967). Chap. 3 of Vol. 1 reflects on Scripture as canon (pp. 83-138).

The same thing happens, according to Berkouwer, in Roman Catholic theology. Here too all the historical problems, all uncertainty and hesitation, are put aside, and that because of the Catholic view of the Church.<sup>9</sup> Here, as well as in Protestant orthodoxy, a "formal" idea of the canon is being handled, i.e., an idea in which the content of Scripture (the gospel) is of minor or no importance. The canon of Scripture has authority as such, regardless of its content or its message. When the Church can guarantee canonicity, then a formal idea of the canon is inevitable (pp. 98-100).

Berkouwer rejects all the solutions which refer simply to God's providence, to the witness of the Spirit, or to the authority of the Church. Outside the content of the canon itself, there is no isolated authority which could throw any light on the formation of the canon and on the canon as norm (p. 100).

But another way lies open, the way of salvation history.<sup>10</sup> Already in the second century, according to historical research, there is a center of certainty as to the acceptance of primordial Christian writings. In relation to the message of salvation, the Church experiences the four Gospels and the Pauline letters as "canon." Besides the center, we also find uncertain elements. They are the marginal areas. All kinds of relative considerations made the Church careful in receiving them as "canon." The evidence of the marginal areas was not as absolute as the evidence of the central message. In a "formal" idea of the canon, however, such nuances of evidence are impossible (pp. 101-2).

The main question is not yet answered. Why did the Church, in its encounter with the central message, experience an absolute certainty? We have to go back to the salvation history out of which the canon arises. Salvation history covers the history of Jesus Christ and of His apostles. This privileged period of human history did not go on indefinitely. It was closed and was followed by Church history. In its encounter with the apostolic witness, the Church surrendered to this witness with an absolute certainty as to its content—to the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The Church's faith experiences itself as related to the full apostolic authority which is founded in Jesus Christ. His promise is going to be realized through the full apostolic authority, so that His community is founded on the witness of the apostles. The New Testament canon is so intimately connected with salvation history that it shares its unique character. This process can never be repeated. Therefore the canon is

<sup>9</sup> Berkouwer refers to K. Rahner, *Über die Schriftinspiration* (Freiburg, 1958) and to my study (cf. note 1 above).

<sup>10</sup> Berkouwer follows H. Ridderbos, *Heilsgeschiedenis en Heilige Schrift van het Nieuwe Testament* (Kampen, 1955).

essentially closed, exactly for the same reason that salvation history is a closed period (pp. 103-5).

The view of the canon based on salvation history throws a clear light on the actual formation of the canon and on the historical doubts and hesitations. The qualitative canon (the center) belongs to salvation history, while the quantitative canon (the last margins) belongs to Church history. Ultimately the question of the canon is of a Christological and not of an ecclesiological nature (p. 106).

In the canon the Church hears Jesus Christ speaking and knows itself bound to the Lord. So the relation of the canon to salvation history explains why there is a canon and how it functions. There is no question of a criterion outside the canon. The relation with salvation history indicates central certainty and allows marginal uncertainty at the same time. In drawing the boundaries, the Church was involved directly and actively. This process is part of Church history. The question is, where should the final boundaries be drawn? Of decisive importance was the conformity in content between the marginal writings and the central canon which was already received. Calvin was thinking in the same direction when confronted with the problem of the *antilegomena*: they do not contain anything which would run counter to the other writings (pp. 107-10).

The Church knows itself bound to Jesus Christ through the canon. This bond is not founded on the authoritative decision of the Church itself nor even on the witness of the Holy Spirit, if one would interpret the witness in such a manner that it would take away every doubt about the canonicity of all these books. The certainty of the Church can only be understood as coming from the message of salvation, from the central content of the canonical writings. It is a dynamic certainty which originates from the message itself and should be directed continuously towards a deeper understanding of the writings which bear witness to Jesus Christ (p. 113).

Finally, Berkouwer refers to Luther's position. Luther's view of the canon was also rooted in salvation history. Luther's canon was a Christological one. This answers the objections raised sometimes against his criticism of some New Testament writings. Was Luther's criticism of James a clear indication of disobedience to the New Testament? If one insists on the absolute authority of the Church, which would have fixed the boundaries of the canon once and for all, then objections against Luther's attitude are easily understandable. But if one accepts the Reformation view of the canon, then this type of objection is impossible; for Luther made his critical remarks about James from the evident center of the salvation message. His attitude could be compared with

that of the early Church in relation to the *antilegomena*: for Luther also, the point at issue was the conformity with the central message of salvation (pp. 121-24).

Before we start a dialogue with Berkouwer about his interpretation of what he calls the "formal" idea of the canon in Roman Catholic theology, we would like to report on some recent opinions about the historical process involved in the formation of the canon.

#### RECENT THESES ON THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

The last of the six theses with which H. von Campenhausen concludes his book on the formation of the Christian Bible<sup>11</sup> proceeds as follows: In an analysis of the traditional canon it is not legitimate to use arguments which had no role at all in the historical process of the formation of the canon. In particular, the arguments which in later times were supposed to defend the infallibility, harmony, and unity of Scripture have no validity (p. 384).

In von Campenhausen's view of the canon, Marcion's role was decisive. The idea of the Christian canon and its realization originated with Marcion. About the year 150 he rejected the living Christian tradition and wanted to rely only on a "corrected," dogmatically revised Lucan Gospel and on ten epistles by Paul. The Church was forced to set a larger and uncorrected collection against this reduction and for the first time designed an ecclesiastical canon (p. 379). The Church's canon contained, in addition to the four Gospels, a more extensive collection of Pauline letters. A similar thesis was already defended by von Harnack, with the difference, however, that von Campenhausen even denies the existence of a four-Gospel canon before Marcion (pp. 173-75, 168-69).

The acceptance of a *Corpus Paulinum* in the Catholic Church was not, according to von Campenhausen, a matter of course. The use Marcion and others had made of Pauline epistles seemed to have discredited Paul completely. In the same period, for example, Papias and Justin kept silent about Paul. On the one hand, the Church could not give up the Pauline epistles; on the other hand, Paul's ideas had to be reconciled with the needs and the dominating opinions within the Church. Von Campenhausen holds that the Pastorals were written at that time and exactly for that purpose. It was only with these inauthentic Pauline letters that the true heritage of the Apostle became endurable for the Church and became "canonical." In the same years the Second Letter of Peter was composed and it emphasized how difficult it is to understand Paul's letters correctly. The ignorant and unstable misinterpret them to their own destruction (2 Pt 3:16; pp. 208-13).

<sup>11</sup> H. von Campenhausen, *Die Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Tübingen, 1968).

Later on in the struggle with Montanism, which appealed to secret apostolic traditions as well as writings, the Church was forced again to make an important decision: the collection of Christian writings was definitely closed; nothing further could be added (p. 379).

Towards the end of the second century, as a result of the controversies, the ecclesiastical collection of Old and New Testament writings had developed its definite form and meaning as to the essential points. The still existing differences of opinion concerning Apocalypse, Hebrews, Philemon, and the Catholic Epistles were relatively small. For a fundamental understanding of the canon, these differences have no significance at all (p. 377).

With Irenaeus, however, we come to a decisive turning point in the history of the canon. He embodied the transition from the old time of faith through a living tradition to the new time of conscious canonical standards (p. 213).

Finally, what motives played a decisive part in the historical demarcation of the canon? What authority did the Church attach to the canon? In four theses von Campenhausen tries to characterize the motivation and evaluation of this process.

1) The primordial writings were not the only source of Christian faith. They were always accompanied by a living tradition in which Christ was preached and taught. The Church abided by the essential points of the whole complex of the living doctrine as the rule of truth. This rule did not stand above Scripture, but with Scripture it reached back to the same origin, i.e., to the preaching of the apostles (pp. 379-80).

2) The authority of Scripture was based on the reliability of the prophetic voices announcing Christ and the apostolic voices bearing witness to Him. The content of the prophetic and apostolic witness was decisive, and not the question of authorship or authorization. The New Testament witnesses must date from the time of the apostles and their disciples, because this time was historically close to Christ. The present widely-disseminated opinion that apostolic authorship was a determining principle for a New Testament writing is devoid of all historical foundation (pp. 380-81).

3) The essential parts of the Old and New Testament were never determined by a decision of the Church. The New Testament consolidated itself in the use that was made of primordial Christian writings by the churches under the direction of their spiritual leaders. Repeated use in the liturgy was a condition for eventually receiving a writing as canonical, but in cases of doubt, liturgical use did not exclude an examination of its authenticity. We do not find official decisions before the end of the fourth century (pp. 381-82).



4) These writings were considered "holy." Although all of them contained a reliable witness to the Christian truth, there were nevertheless differences in importance. The Gospels ranked above the rest, and the Pauline epistles enjoyed a greater authority than the letters by other apostles. The idea of "inspiration" was first associated with the Old Testament prophetic books and was applied to the New Testament books only with hesitation. Origen enlarged the idea of inspiration, applying it fundamentally to the entire Scripture. This unhistorical view of inspiration, though curtailed in later theology, has never been entirely overcome (p. 383).

In an article published shortly before von Campenhausen's book, A. C. Sundberg remarks that since the period immediately before Harnack until the present, the history of the canon has been described in three phases.<sup>12</sup> The first phase covers the period in which an ancient Christian writing was first recognized as "canonical." The second phase describes the appearance of a core New Testament at the end of the second century. Finally, in the third phase, definitive boundaries were established (p. 452).

This approach, according to Sundberg, is no longer tenable. As to the first phase, the Church did not receive a closed canon from the Old Testament people but an Old Testament collection of books on the way to canonization. If, therefore, quotations from apostolic literature were put on the same level as Old Testament quotations, the parallelism could not grant "canonicity" to these apostolic texts. The reason is very simple. There was not yet an Old Testament *canon*. Moreover, the formulas and terms sometimes used to introduce quotations from the apostolic writings (e.g., "it is written," "Scripture says," "Scriptures say") do not have conclusive force. The expressions did not have the supposed exclusive meaning and were in no way different from their synonyms (pp. 452-57).

As to the second phase, the arguments which would demonstrate the existence of a core New Testament at the end of the second century are, according to Sundberg, not at all convincing. The presupposition was that Tatian, in the composition of his Diatesseron, was using our four Gospels. But this does not prove that Tatian considered these four Gospels to be canonical. He used these Gospels the same way as the Evangelists had used the sources at their disposal. Another argument was based on the Muratorian Canon.<sup>13</sup> This Canon, together with

<sup>12</sup> A. C. Sundberg, "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon," *Studia evangelica* 4/1: *The New Testament Scriptures* (Berlin, 1968) 452-61.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. M.-J. Lagrange, *Histoire ancienne du canon du Nouveau Testament* (Paris, 1933) pp. 66-84.

Irenaeus and Tertullian, would furnish evidence of the existence of a core New Testament in Rome at the end of the second century. Sundberg attempts to show, first, that the Muratorian Canon was not written in Rome, and second, that it should be dated between Eusebius and Athanasius, i.e., not at the end of the second century (pp. 457–59).

Having criticized the traditional scheme in studies on the canon, Sundberg makes his own suggestion (pp. 459–60). The first step consisted in the rise of Christian literature to the authoritative level of the Old Testament writings. Rightly, Christian literature was called "Scripture." The second step was taken by the conscious compilation of Christian literature into closed collections. This phase was initiated by Marcion. The final step was the formation of a definite list (*canon*) of New Testament writings. It began with Eusebius in the East and with Jerome in the West and ended with the definitions of the local Councils of Laodicea (East), Carthage, and Hippo (West).

Finally, Sundberg comes to the following conclusions (p. 461). (1) The decisive period in the formation of the New Testament canon occurred at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries rather than at the end of the second century. (2) The heresies of the second century did not play a decisive role. (3) In a way, the struggle to determine the Old Testament canon paralleled the formation of the New Testament canon. (4) The doctrine of Scripture exercised a considerable influence on its formation. (5) The typical characteristic of the canon consisted in its being a closed collection. In this sense the New Testament canon was unequivocally the decision of the Church.

Ellen Flesseman-van Leer's article of 1964 is still moving within the structure attacked later by Sundberg.<sup>14</sup> Before the middle of the second century, neither Jesus' words nor the apostles' letters were quoted as Holy Scripture. What the Lord said and did was considered to be absolutely reliable, and whether His words were written down or not was unimportant (pp. 405–6).

Papias was the first to ascribe a hitherto unknown authority to the apostles in interpreting Jesus' doctrine (p. 406). For Justin, only the Old Testament was Scripture in the full sense, although in his thinking a clear tendency can be noticed to attribute the authority of Scripture to the New Testament writings (pp. 406–9). Around 200 A.D., a core New Testament evidently existed. The four Gospels were generally received as canonical, and there was no doubt about the canonicity of thirteen Pauline epistles, 1 Peter, 1 John, and the Acts of the Apostles. More important than accurate canon boundaries was the fact that there was a

<sup>14</sup> Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, "Prinzipien der Sammlung und Ausscheidung bei der Bildung des Kanons," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 61 (1964) 404–20.

canon. Marcion did not create the idea of a canon. Without Marcion a similar canon would have emerged; he merely speeded the process (p. 410).

For Irenaeus, the New Testament canon was an unproblematic fact, while Tertullian was still looking for arguments, appealing to the tradition of the apostolic churches. The New Testament writings were reaching back directly to the apostles (pp. 409–12).

The article concludes with a few interesting questions (pp. 418–20). (1) Do we have to attach a different value to those writings which were powerful enough to have canonical authority of themselves, and to those which owed their canonicity to a later decision by the Church? (2) The decisions of the early Church were based on historical grounds: the apostolic authorship as a historical fact. However, these grounds have very frequently been proved untenable. The clearest examples are Hebrews and 2 Peter, which were received into the canon only because of their supposed apostolic authorship. Are we able to accept a decision made by the early Church if the arguments on which the decision was based are no longer valid? (3) Today some theologians have been developing new criteria to support the traditional canon. A criterion, e.g., could be found in the fact that a canonical writing allows itself to be preached (H. Diem, O. Weber). But is it legitimate to defend the traditional canon with arguments and criteria which did not play the slightest part in the actual formation of the canon? (4) The formation of the canon was actually influenced by the presupposition that there existed a harmony between all the canonical books. Are we able to accept this presupposition of the unity and harmony of the entire Scripture? (5) In the idea of canonicity "inspiration" is included. Must we not rethink the principle of inspiration and ask ourselves what part this doctrine should play in our exegesis?

#### A HISTORICAL PROCESS AND ITS THEOLOGICAL MEANING

The recent historical studies to which we have referred make it clearer than ever that the New Testament canon was received by the Church in a long historical process. Actually this is not a new idea. It was already the firm conviction of historians in the nineteenth century. Theodor Zahn and Adolf von Harnack, in particular, thoroughly documented this historical view.<sup>15</sup> The special contribution of the above-mentioned recent studies is that they point to the long duration of the historical proc-

<sup>15</sup> Th. Zahn, *Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* 1/1–2: *Das Neue Testament vor Origenes* (Erlangen–Leipzig, 1888, 1889); 2/1–2: *Urkunden und Belege zum ersten und dritten Band* (Erlangen–Leipzig, 1890, 1892); *id.*, *Grundriss der Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons* (2nd ed.; Leipzig, 1904); A. von Harnack, *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments und die wichtigsten Folgen der neuen Schöpfung* (Leipzig, 1914).

ess and to the questionable validity of some historical arguments used to support the present canon. It is now definitely established that the formation of the canon did not take place in the apostolic generation. Indeed, this process belongs to the earliest history of the postapostolic Church. One might differ as to who conceived the idea of a closed New Testament collection. Was it the Church or Marcion? One might interpret the available historical indications differently and build up divergent historical reconstructions. One conclusion, however, is certain: the consciousness of the postapostolic community was decisive for the acceptance of certain early Christian writings as canonical and for the final delimitation of this collection. We are able to trace very clearly that the consciousness and the insight of the community was growing. Although some uncertainty and hesitation did exist as to particular writings, and although some regional churches held different views, the Church did come ultimately to the recognition of one closed collection—our traditional canon.

The most important question has not yet been touched. Which forces were operating in the Church's growing consciousness? Which historical dynamic moved the Church? Did the early Christian writings thrust themselves upon the consciousness of the Church exclusively by their own power? Did the Church undergo this dynamic thrust in a merely passive way? Did a special "external" witness of the Holy Spirit speak out of these writings directly to the "internal" witness of the Spirit in the heart of the faithful? Did doctrinal insight or historical knowledge bring the Church to acceptance of the canon? Was the Church in its historical groping and searching guided to the truth by the Spirit? Was the guidance by the Spirit fallible or infallible?

Flesseman-van Leer and von Campenhausen offered the thesis that in the dynamic historical process only those forces were really operating of which the Church was conscious at the time. May we really restrict the meaning of a historical process to the consciousness that contemporaries had of that meaning? Or is it not rather typical for human history that the meaning of a period, of a historical process, or of an influential personality realizes and elaborates itself slowly in the course of history? And is it not an essential aspect of human history that later generations are given a deeper insight into a past event?<sup>16</sup>

Rightly, G. C. Berkouwer rejects a merely "formal" idea of the canon, i.e., an idea in which the content and the message of salvation are omitted from consideration. However, we dissociate ourselves from his

<sup>16</sup> Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (2nd ed.; Tübingen, 1965) pp. 250-90; W. Pannenberg, "Hermeneutik und Universalgeschichte," in *id.*, *Grundfragen systematischer Theologie: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Göttingen, 1967) pp. 91-122.

opinion that the Roman Catholic idea of the canon coincides with the formal concept of the canon. In the actual history of the canon both "formal" and "material" factors were decisive. One cannot separate the "formal" and "material" aspects of this process. On the one hand, the experience of the Church with the content of these writings, i.e., with the message of salvation, was of prime importance. The Church owed its whole existence to the "content," i.e., to the risen Lord. In these writings the Church felt and received the structures of its own being and of its special relation to Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the Church wanted to obey the "apostolic" authority as the authentic representation of Christ's authority. The Church therefore received the apostolic writings not just because of their historical closeness to the time of the apostles, but primarily because of their authority. So the "formal" aspect of the recognition of the canon cannot be rejected without impairing the very idea of apostolic authority. Although the specifying characteristic of an apostle includes a historical closeness to the salvation event in Jesus Christ, the apostle was more than a witness. Through his mission he was able and authorized to understand the salvation event, to interpret it correctly, and to preach it with frankness. The apostle was conscious of having received a charism to preach the gospel authentically and to build up the Church. In the actual acceptance of the canon, both the "material" and "formal" aspects were of decisive importance, i.e., both evangelical content and apostolic authority. Without the dimension of authority, Christianity would fall back to the level of a philosophical doctrine.<sup>17</sup>

In the Roman Catholic conviction, at least as we try to analyze it, the acceptance of the definite canon of Scripture was a profession of faith. The Church, confidently surrendering to Jesus Christ, professed its faith in the mysterious character of these books exclusively. As people of God, the Church knew and experienced itself bound to the Lord and received this personal relationship in accordance with the structures of the apostolic Church as they were "written." In this profession of faith both dimensions were present: both the confident and obedient acceptance of the apostolic tradition and the grateful experience of the content of this tradition. However, an authentic profession of faith, though formed and expressed in a particular historical situation, is not bound and limited to the passing situation. From that time on it belongs, realized and dynamic, to the living faith of the community in Christ. The charismatic experience the Church had with the historical acceptance of the canon did not disappear. It remains part of the Church's insight into its faith and will never be ossified as mere historical fact.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Søren A. Kierkegaard, *Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*, in *The Present Age* (New York, 1962) pp. 89-108.

What is canonical allows itself to be preached and believed.<sup>18</sup> It is essentially dynamic; it belongs to the living community of the faithful. The Church receives the canon in a continuously dynamic relationship, both to the apostolic authority and to the evangelical content.

The crux of the whole question is the recognition of the witness of the Spirit in the profession of faith of the Church. Does the Holy Spirit bear witness with the faith of the Church that the word of God is present in this canon? How was this guidance brought into effect concretely? Where and how is this witness of the Spirit audible for us? Are we able to recognize in faith that it is really God's Spirit guiding us?

The separated Christian traditions answer these questions differently. If we try to understand and interpret the Roman Catholic tradition correctly, then the answer is affirmative: the Spirit's witness is indeed audible for us. In the authentic witness of the Church, i.e., in its profession of faith, the Spirit's witness sounds audibly through a human witness. The Spirit guides the Church into all the truth, including the truth of the profession of the canon. It is exclusively due to this presence of the Spirit's witness in the Church's profession of faith that the later generations of the Church receive the same profession of faith. This witness of the Spirit is given to the Church once and for all. The present Church generation receives the audible witness of the Spirit ultimately in obedience to the authority of the Spirit. But at the same time it receives this audible witness in the experience that here the message of salvation is preached. Absolute obedience is only possible in face of the witness and authority of God's Spirit. In this obedience the "formal" and "material" aspects of authority and canon coincide completely.

It is in this light that the profession of faith concerning the canon of Scripture should be analyzed. The Holy Spirit does not guide the Church outside and above human experience and growth. The Church has to struggle with and in human history, with and in uncertainty and hesitation. The Spirit guides the Church through human struggling and searching into insight and discretion. If the new insight is accepted and confessed by the Church as part of its profession of faith, then the added dimension is not a merely human dimension any more. The Church is not "free" to drop or cancel the new dimension given by the Spirit. In its unwavering profession of the canon the Church cannot and does not want to put aside the uncertainty and hesitation which we discover in the actual formation of the canon. On the other hand, the Church certainly cannot and does not want to put the guidance of the

<sup>18</sup> Cf. H. Diem, *Das Problem des Schrifthanons* (Zurich, 1952); *id.*, "Zur Problematik theologischer Wahrheitsfindung," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 95 (1970) 161-72. Diem's perspective, however, is different from ours.

Spirit in its history outside this history.<sup>19</sup>

The obedience to the witness of the Spirit in an earlier ecclesiastical profession of faith has nothing to do with a "law" which would limit the freedom of a Christian. Thus, Paul's emphasis on freedom was not contrary to the authority of certain traditions. As to Christ's resurrection, Paul professed his faith in a tradition which he received and handed down.<sup>20</sup>

According to the Roman Catholic understanding, the formation of the canon was more than a merely profane historical process. Naturally, it was a historical process with historical meaning, certainty, and doubt. At the same time another dimension was present, so that the historical process received an additional meaning. It owed the second meaning to the Spirit's witness in the Church's profession of faith as realized in the historical process. In other words, this historical process had a theological meaning.

A last important question must be mentioned. It refers to the border lines, suggested by Berkouwer, between the central books, which offer absolute certainty, and the marginal writings, which would be of lesser reliability. The authority of the marginal writings would depend on a comparison of their content with the content of the central books. Such a view, however, might encounter serious objections. Where exactly are the border lines between central and marginal writings to be drawn? Are these lines not dependent on our historical (and therefore approximate) knowledge?<sup>21</sup> How could a central book offer us absolute reliability if it is only relatively certain that it really belongs to the central writings? The answer might be that this absolute reliability is given in the experience of the Church with the message of salvation contained in these writings. Thus all the historical uncertainties are put aside, a fact which Berkouwer so emphatically wants to avoid.

Is there no place in the Roman Catholic view of the canon for New Testament writings which are more or less authoritative? A tentative answer should take account of two different perspectives. On the one hand, all the books and every part of these books are canonical.<sup>22</sup> All the books have "authority," including the books which sometimes and in some churches were doubted. On the other hand, it is evident that not

<sup>19</sup> Cf. the interesting remarks on the guidance of the Spirit by A. A. van Ruler, *Reformatische opmerkingen in de ontmoeting met Rome* (Hilversum, 1965) pp. 97-110.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. von Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 126. In this context the formulation by Flesselman-van Leer seems at least unfortunate: "Das Tridentinische Konzil schloss dann endgültig den Kanon und machte ihn zum bindenden Glaubensgesetz" (*art. cit.*, pp. 417-18).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Søren A. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton, 1968) pp. 25-47.

<sup>22</sup> Council of Trent, *Decretum de libris sacris et de traditionibus recipiendis* (DS 1505 [784]).

every part, not every view, within the canonical writings enjoys the same value and authority. This even applies to parts contained in what Berkouwer calls the central books. The message of salvation comes to us in human history. It needs no comment that in the rich diversity of common and extraordinary human events, not everything has the same bond with the message of salvation. In this sense we may distinguish between "central" and "marginal" pericopes everywhere in Scripture. What matters most is the genuine understanding of what the message of salvation (the gospel) really is. We would like to point to the difference between the basic understanding of Scripture (and of the gospel) and the interpretation of particular texts.<sup>23</sup>

According to Heidegger's philosophy, "understanding" belongs as an original component to the existential structures of the human being; it is a fundamental mode of our being. This primary, original understanding codetermines together with other original components the depth of our human being itself, while "explaining" as a special form of knowing is already a derivative of this original understanding.<sup>24</sup> The same is true for "considering" and "thinking": both are already remote derivatives of the original understanding (p. 147). The activity of explanation, therefore, rests upon and follows from the original understanding. It is incorrect to maintain that understanding is the result of explanation; for explanation is nothing other than the elaboration of possibilities which are designed in the original understanding (p. 148). For that reason, explanation can never be without presuppositions: it always presupposes the original understanding (p. 150).

This distinction is, we think, of extraordinary importance for theological method. With two examples we hope to illustrate the range of this distinction. Our first example is borrowed from Kierkegaard's brilliant analysis of the difference between a genius and an apostle. "When Christ says, 'There is an eternal life'; and when a theological student says, 'There is an eternal life': both say the same thing, and there is no more deduction, development, profundity or thoughtfulness in the first expression than in the second. . . . And yet there is an eternal qualitative difference between them!"<sup>25</sup> The reason is simple: Christ speaks with divine authority, the theological student does not. Whether one accepts divine authority or not, is the decisive factor. It is not by evaluating the content of a doctrine that we could reach the conclusion that divine authority is involved (p. 93). In a basic understanding of Scripture we either accept or reject an original quality of

<sup>23</sup> Cf. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (11th ed.; Tübingen, 1967) pp. 142-53.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 142-43.

<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard, *Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*, in *The Present Age*, pp. 100-101.



Scripture, namely, that it enjoys divine authority.

Our second example is taken from the legal order. An exhaustive understanding of a given legal formulation includes more than the explanation of what the law says and what its intention is. The characteristic quality of a law consists in its real influence on the juridical order of human society. The law can and should be executed by enforcing measures. The fact that a legal formulation enjoys this qualitative characteristic belongs to the original structure of the law. Basically, a law wants to be understood in the original way. The "interpretation" of a law is already a derived form of the basic understanding. This example from the legal order is an illustration of what we mean by the distinction between basic understanding and exegetical interpretation. It is, of course, in no way an argument in our theological reflection on Scripture.

As to the concrete function of Scripture in human preaching and theologizing, it is necessary to analyze our basic understanding of Scripture. Everything depends on an authentic basic understanding, in faith and in the Spirit. It is through an authentic basic understanding that we do justice to Scripture itself. Scripture, this way, is recognized and received as canon, as authoritative, as containing the word of God. In and through this recognition Scripture itself is able to function as such. A difference in basic understanding changes the character of the entire Scripture fundamentally. In a way, our basic understanding is creative as to the very essence of Scripture.<sup>26</sup> But within the same basic understanding certain differences in interpretation are quite possible.

Who determines and exercises this basic understanding? Is Scripture not only interpreting itself (*suiipsius interpretes*) but also "understanding" itself? Does this self-interpretation and self-understanding exclude every human element? Or rather, must not every situation of understanding and interpretation be an active human understanding and an active human interpretation? If the human creative element of understanding and interpretation is excluded, would that not be a form of Docetism, as if God's word could come to us outside the form of the human word?

Similar distinctions should be applied to the authentic understanding and interpretation of the gospel. A human contribution to the basic understanding of the gospel is necessary; it will, in a way, codetermine what the gospel means for us concretely. Here not only anthropological and philosophical ideas exercise a codetermining influence, but also theological views on grace, sinfulness, justification, freedom, church structures, etc. These views codetermine our basic understanding of what the gospel is, and they are of decisive importance for the per-

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gadamer, *op. cit.*, pp. 361-82.

spectives of our exegetical interpretation.<sup>27</sup> This does not derogate from God's revelation, but it is the recognition that God's revelation became a reality in our human world, in Jesus Christ and His community. It means that we accept in faith the closeness of the transcendent God in our fellow man Jesus Christ. Through His death and resurrection He called the Church into being and He gave His Spirit permanently to this community of human beings.

#### EPILOGUE

Recent studies on the history of the New Testament canon yield several important conclusions. That the final shape of the New Testament emerged in a long historical process which took place in post-apostolic times is an incontestable fact. The studies to which we referred pointed out this conclusion clearly and definitely, notwithstanding the divergent opinions about the duration and structure of this process and about the decisive influences and motives determining its direction.

<sup>27</sup> Only after completing the manuscript of this article did I receive a copy of *Das Neue Testament als Kanon*, edited by Ernst Käsemann (Göttingen, 1970). This is a collective work, with fifteen contributions by various authors reprinted from earlier sources, and an introduction, a critical analysis, and a summary by Käsemann. I was frankly astonished at his reaction to some of the views expressed in my *Kanon und Kirche* (pp. 381 f.). In numerous places in this work the attempt is made to reflect on traditional Reformation affirmations as viewed from within a Catholic perspective. I argued that, viewed in this perspective, these affirmations are not only meaningful, but even characterize Scripture more truly and more deeply than when affirmed in a Reformation perspective: e.g., *scriptura suiipsius interpres*, the freedom of Scripture, Scripture and the witness of the Holy Spirit, the obedient Church. Any critic is entitled to disagree with my views. But it is disappointing to find Käsemann removing these views from their dialectical context, so that nothing is left but a static collection. Both in this article and in *Kanon und Kirche* it has been my intention to point at what I have termed above the "basic understanding" of Scripture; Käsemann seems to limit himself to what I have called "exegetical interpretation" in the strict sense. He seems unaware of the burning question of basic understanding, and his critical analysis is not concerned to enter into a consideration of this question. Nowhere does he even mention Heidegger and Gadamer. And Pannenberg's struggle to develop a universal-historical hermeneutic is dismissed by Käsemann in less than a page with the remark that, though one can wish good luck to these theological astronauts, it is better not to rely on them (p. 393). The key to Käsemann's interpretation of Scripture (his "canon in the canon") is his own interpretation of the message of justification (pp. 368-71, 404-8). He dismisses as mere "ciphers" (with which he wants nothing to do and which he says should be left to computers: p. 365) other criteria such as the voice of the one Christ (pp. 365, 368: against Hermann Diem), the Jesus event (pp. 383-385: against Herbert Braun), *Kyrios* and "not-further-reducible apostolic preaching" (pp. 388-90: against Willi Marxsen).

I would urge that genuine ecumenical dialogue must attempt a serious analysis of the basic understanding of Scripture in order to lay open all the hidden philosophical-theological preunderstandings of God's word, Christ, justification, Holy Spirit, church, apostolic, historical, etc.

These divergent opinions should not astonish us, however, since uncertainty in the discovery of the facts and discrepancy in their evaluation are an essential part of the historical method.<sup>28</sup>

Even more complicated than the historical research was the question of the authority of these books. If human hesitations and decisions were decisive in the final delimitation of the New Testament canon, does not the human involvement weaken the authority of Scripture? Before recognizing the authority of certain scriptural texts, it would be necessary to demonstrate with historical arguments that these texts belong to the canon. The reliability of the conclusions on authority would not surpass the level of historical certainty—in which case the New Testament canon would be subject to revision continuously and essentially.

As we have seen, two avenues of investigation were suggested to deal with this impasse: either by appealing to the evangelical content of Scripture (the gospel) or by relying upon those writings which were never the object of discussion and doubt. Moreover, it was stated that a recognition of the *entire* New Testament canon as authoritative would make the authority of Scripture dependent on a source outside the canon. In this case the canon would be understood as “law,” as a “formal” body exercising authority without contact with the evangelical content. Such a formal idea of the canon would be characteristic of the Roman Catholic view of Scripture.

The specific contribution of our present study could be summarized as follows.

1) The formation of the New Testament canon realized itself in the early postapostolic Church. In this process of acceptance the Church was inspired by the evangelical content of the writings—more exactly, by the gospel as it was received, lived, and preached by the primordial, apostolic Church. At the same time, the Church knew itself bound to the apostolic tradition and to the apostolic authority. The Church experienced evangelical content and apostolic authority as a unity. It is incorrect, it seems to us, to describe this view of the canon as “formal.”

2) In this historical process the Church came to an ever clearer insight into the definite boundaries of the New Testament canon. The growing discernment expressed itself in a profession of faith, initially around the year 400 and definitely at the Council of Trent. The certainty contained in an authentic profession of faith surpasses a merely historical certainty, because the Church recognized and received in the historical process the witness of the Spirit. Later generations of the Church receive this profession of faith because of its relation to the Spirit's witness. Therefore they believe that the boundaries of the canon

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Bilanz der Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler and Robert Vander Gucht (Freiburg, 1969) pp. 285–87.

are no longer revisable. The Spirit's witness does not bear or need reform or revision.

3) The certainty of faith about the boundaries of the canon does not brush aside the historical process as unimportant. Historical studies have not become superfluous. On the contrary, an accurate investigation of the reasons why certain writings labored under difficulties is of interest for the study of dogma and its development.

4) The close relationship with the Spirit's witness qualifies the essence and the value of the canon. Recognition or rejection of the pneumatic quality is constitutive for the canon and for the way it concretely functions. In other words, the Church's basic understanding and acceptance of this quality codetermines the concrete canon.

5) Reception of the entire canon as authoritative does not mean a falling back into a legalistic attitude. Not everything contained in the canon belongs to the central message. The more or less marginal areas have differing relations to the center—the gospel; they have, therefore, diverging values.

6) We are painfully aware of the fact that Christians of the non-Catholic traditions cannot accept several lines of our analysis. But if our analysis and interpretation of the Roman Catholic view contains true elements, the ecumenical dialogue should take them into consideration, because here we touch the heart of the matter.

The much proffered objection that in the Catholic view the Church is put "above" Scripture is in its generality simply not correct. Many tentative answers have been given to this objection. Ours would go in this direction, that the Roman Catholic view of the Church focuses on the one living reality of Jesus Christ and His community. Scripture is the prophetic and apostolic expression and rule of the living faith of the community in the Spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately the divisions go back to various understandings of the Spirit's work and witness, and of the way the risen Lord is present in His Church (cf. Mt 28:18–20) and grants His Spirit, who will lead us to the complete truth (Jn 16:13).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation 10: "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit. . . . It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls" (*The Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 117–18).