

Did God actually say...? :

**Procedures, problems and proposals
for the recognition of the canonical words of God**

Marc Andrew Lloyd

MA in Theology

Oak Hill Theological College

January 2003

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INTRODUCTION

The issue under consideration

This dissertation considers how Christians ought to recognise the canonical words of God.

Whilst it is understood that words of God with a temporary or local significance, such as prophecies within the modern Charismatic movement, might be defended by some Christians, the focus here is on the canonical word of God, that is, the Scriptures which God intends as the normative rule and standard for his people¹.

The recognition of particular words as properly canonical is therefore (at least on the traditional Evangelical understanding) closely related to their recognition as the authoritative words of God. Some of the arguments in favour of the authority of the Bible will be evident from what follows, though a full defence is not attempted here².

The issue is considered primarily as a contemporary theological question, rather than by a historical study of the fortunes of each particular book of the present Evangelical³ canon. Historical data is introduced only where this is thought relevant to the identification of the words of God. It is recognised, for example, that if the degree of acceptance of a particular work by the Christian church were thought to be an indication for its canonicity, then it would be of the first importance to discover the degree to which this document has been used and esteemed.

The importance of the issue

Although the contents of the Bible is often assumed, it is clear that determining its components is of crucial importance.

It is vital for the faith and life of the people of God that they should know with confidence whether or not a particular “word” is to be treated as God’s word written. Rightly regarding the words of God as supremely authoritative, individual Christians and churches will want to base their beliefs and practices on what God has said. Without a conviction that particular words are God’s, and hence carry His authority, Scripture would not function as a rule either for the individual believer or for the church. Before one can trust and obey God’s word, one must be able to say what God’s word is. As Calvin says: “... the Scriptures obtain full authority [in practice] among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard. This matter is very well worth treating more fully and weighing more

¹ This is in keeping, of course, with the etymology of “canon” (Greek, kanon) meaning rule / rod or measure and hence standard, norm or authority see Packer, “Scripture” in IVP Dictionary of Theology; “canon” and “canon of Scripture” in Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church and esp. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, Appendix 1, “History of the Word Canon”, p289ff

² For Evangelical approaches to the inspiration and authority of the Bible, see for example, B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration*; J. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*; D Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority*; J I Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*

³ Or Protestant.

carefully.”⁴. Conversely, if words were to be accepted as God’s when they were not, believers would be liable to adopt spurious notions and unfounded practices.

Certain doctrines, in particular, logically depend on the word of God being identified with confidence. For example, the practical force of doctrine of the clarity of the word of God would be truncated if this clear communication from God were only opaquely recognisable to God’s people. Certainly it is true that the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture is primarily an affirmation about the purity of the word of God itself, not the ability of a particular interpreter to understand it fully. However, though God’s excellence in speaking clearly might be preserved, something more than an abstract affirmation of the objective quality of God’s word is usually intended by the notion of perspicuity. Associated with the idea of the clarity of the word of God is a desire to say that God communicates effectively with His people. As the Westminster Confession states: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: *yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.*” (VII, emphasis added). If there were no reliable access to the words of God and no means of distinguishing his normative words, then the thrust of this affirmation would be impoverished. Though the doctrine of perspicuity may technically be preserved, for example, if it were held that the believer may attain sufficient understanding of the Word of God without being able to confidently recognise it as such, the benefit would be lost.

More generally, for the Bible-believer, all other doctrines depend on knowing God’s words. The Evangelical commitment to the *sola scriptura* principle of the supreme formal authority of the Bible is only operative to the extent that the material content of the word of God is recognised. Thus, just as the issue of the authority of the word of God is fundamental to a developed Christian theology, so conclusions regarding the extent of the foundation documents are necessary if other doctrines are to be developed from them. Securing the canon, then, is a necessary aspect of establishment of the authority of the Bible, without which an evangelical system of theology is unreliable. Without knowing what God says, believers will not know what they ought to believe: Evangelicals will be unable to do theology.

Given the ultimate place which the Bible holds in Evangelical thought, explaining how certain words are known to be from God will also be important apologetically. If Evangelicals appear to show an inability to demonstrate why they hold that their canon is correct, their theological opponents are likely to focus on this lacuna.

Further, particular Biblical warnings (such as Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 30:6) about adding to or subtracting from the words of God require that serious attention be given to demarcating the extent of the canon. It seems reasonable to see these commands as requiring an accurate process of canonization, rather than merely as a warning not to edit the particular manuscripts in which they are contained. It is striking that in the face of such serve stipulations, those who first compiled the Scriptures had

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol 1, p74 (1.7.1)

the confidence to include other words alongside the already accepted words of God. It seems that they, at least, were not troubled by accurately identifying God's words.

Indeed, Revelation 22:18-19 warns that those who add anything to "the words of the prophecy of this book" will be subject to the plagues it describes and that those who take away from this book of prophecy will forfeit their share in the tree of life and in the city described in this book. Evidently this is an extremely serious matter. Though the reference here is clearly primarily to the book of Revelation, it is not apparent that it alone should enjoy this unalterable status. Indeed, it may even be argued that the inclusion of this warning towards the close of the New Testament canon, as it is usually arranged, is not accidental and encourages the reader to think of the completed collection as permanently established⁵. The prohibitions against altering the word of God require that believers are able to say with confidence which are God's words. Otherwise, those who compiled the canon may have quite honestly erred in adding human words to the collection of divine words or by subtracting God's words.

Likewise, the many specific commands of the Bible to observe God's Word (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:10; 7:19; 11:19; 12:32; Joshua 23:6) can only be obeyed if one knows what the words of God are. The Bible does not suggest that the believer can legitimately claim the excuse that he hadn't realised that the word that confronted him was really from God. Rather, for example, the people of Old Testament times are thought able to recognise the Word of God, understand it sufficiently and to pass it on to their children, instructing them to obey it (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

⁵ Grudem makes this suggestion in Carson and Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*, p49

PROPOSALS EVALUATED

There are a number of different approaches to the question of how Christians ought to recognise the canonical words of God. For convenience and clarity, the following survey uses labels from movements within Christendom and the methods which are associated with them⁶, although, as will be apparent, some of the lines of reasoning are not confined to the traditions of which they are thought to be characteristic.

Liberal Proposals: Reason & Historical Research

The idea of an authoritative canon challenged

The Liberal tradition is sometimes uncomfortable with the notion of a canonical word of God as such and challenges the orthodox conception of the authoritative word of God. Indeed, Peter Jensen identifies this as a prominent focus of current debate: “The problem of the canon has become particularly acute in our own day in the academic study of Scripture. The difficulty is even more fundamental than the question of the range of Scripture: the issue now is whether we should have a canon at all.”⁷

The rejection of inspiration

Where Liberals reject a thorough going doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture, the Bible therefore ceases to be regarded as the canonical words of God. James Barr’s approach is typical: “My account of the formation of the biblical tradition is an account of a human work. It is man’s statement of his beliefs, the events he has experienced, the stories he has been told, and so on. It has long been customary to align the Bible with concepts like Word of God, or revelation, and one effect of this has been to align the Bible with a movement from God to man. It is man who developed the biblical tradition and man who decided when it might be suitably fixed and made canonical. If one wants to use the Word-of-God type of language, the proper term for the Bible would be Word of Israel, or Word of some leading early Christians.”⁸ Simply, the Bible is not a God-given rule. Once this move has been made, it is indeed difficult to see why some words of men should be regarded as especially canonical, that is, authoritatively normative for Christian life and faith. Potentially the Bible can be studied as just like any other book and other works can be considered alongside the traditionally canonical books. The value of any writings will need to be judged somehow on their merits.

An authoritative canon a secondary, late development

Some Liberals would appeal to the Scriptures to deny the orthodox protestant conception of the role of an authoritative canon. Walter Bauer, for instance, argues that the notion of orthodoxy is a relatively late development and that the formation of the canon was a later suppression of diversity by Catholic Orthodoxy, not representative of

⁶ C.f. e.g. the categories of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

⁷ Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, p184

⁸ quoted by Dunbar in Carson & Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p346

the most original and authentic Christianity⁹. Similarly, James Barr contends that the earliest Christianity was not concerned to be a religion of the book: “The idea of a near-absolute scriptural *control* of faith is a quite foreign conception, based on a quite different construct of problems, and read into the New Testament statements about Old Testament scripture by a later generation, especially Protestant Orthodoxy, for which the concept of Scriptural *control* of religion and doctrine was of absolute importance.”¹⁰. For Barr, the canon is a result of later fallible human decisions, which would have been entirely alien to the early church. He argues that the notion of canon (the idea that sacred and authoritative writings should be defined and limited) is not of first-rate importance within Biblical Christianity and is non-essential.

Response: an authoritative canon as foundational to Biblical faith

In contrast to this assertion that a notion of the canon is a secondary development, there are good reasons to think that recognised authoritative words are essential to Biblical religion, even though the limits of the canon have been subject to some debate.

As John Frame argues, “The concept of a written word of God does not begin with 20th century fundamentalism or 17th century rationalism or medieval scholasticism or post-apostolic defensiveness or late Jewish legalism. It is embedded in the original construction of the people of God and is assumed throughout Scripture”¹¹.

Frame argues that it is characteristically by His word that God relates to and rules His people. Clear, recognisable and authoritative revelation is required if God’s people are to believe and obey him. “The word is implicit in the very concept of lordship. The Lord is the one who commands. No word, no commands; no commands, no lord”¹².

Meredith Kline’s research, in *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, further supports the thesis that God’s canonical word is central and basic to the way in which God has always related and has determined to relate to His people. Kline argues that ancient Near Eastern treaties provide the formal model for the biblical canon concept. The Bible is in its literary-legal form a covenantal document and the biblical canon must be understood as treaty-canon. Far from being an after thought, the inauguration of the people of God was accompanied by the inception of the canon: “The origin of the Old Testament canon coincided with the founding of the kingdom of Israel by covenant at Sinai. The very treaty that formally established the Israelite theocracy was itself the beginning and nucleus of the total covenantal cluster of writings which constitute the Old Testament canon.”¹³. Kline argues that the whole Bible ought to be understood as covenantal. Thus, “In [a] process of organic extension there was combined with the Pentateuchal record of the establishment of the covenant a centuries-spanning documentary witness to the continuing relationship, consisting in historical accounts, documents of the prophetic emissaries of the Lord, and literary deposits of other aspects

⁹ See Walter Baur, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1971), discussed by Dunbar in Carson and Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p300

¹⁰ quoted by Dunbar in Carson & Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p346

¹¹ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, on-line lecture, p14

¹² Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, on-line lecture, p36

¹³ Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, p43

of covenant life.”¹⁴ Rather than the concept of canon being peripheral and late: “Because the Bible *is* the old and new covenants and because canon is inherent in covenant of the biblical type, canonicity is inherent in the very form and identity of Scripture as the Old and New Testament. The canonical authority of the Bible is in a class by itself because its covenantal words are the words of God. Yet because Scripture is covenant, biblical canonicity, from beginning to end, belongs at a formal literary level to the more broadly attested category of authoritative treaty words. All Scripture is covenantal, and the canonicity of all the Scripture is covenantal. Biblical canon is covenantal canon.”¹⁵

Frame emphasises the necessity of the authoritative word of God in establishing the covenant: “When... God freely chose to create and rule us within a particular covenant structure, he thereby determined to speak to man. That speaking is a central element of that structure. Without that speaking, there would be no covenant.”¹⁶

Peter Jensen argues that the New Testament presentation of the gospel depends on the previous canonical words of God. He writes: “The existence of a lengthy, canonical word of God is thus presupposed by Christian faith”¹⁷ as central to the gospel is the verification that Jesus is the Christ of the Old Testament. Thus, in Jensen’s view: “When Christian scholars doubt the existence of the inspired canon, they doubt the function of their own faith”¹⁸.

Despite the arguments of some liberal scholars, then, it seems clear that the existence of an authoritative canon of words of God is foundational to the religion of the Bible.

Postmodern challenges, contemporary concerns and the hermeneutical gap

Some of the characteristics of Postmodernism also serve to undermine the use of the Bible as the canonical words of God. For example, it is common to hold that human language does not communicate effectively as speakers are so bound to their own cultural situations and concerns. Meaning is provided by the reader and his community, rather than by the author. If the notion of a word of God were countenanced by a postmodern thinker, he would be likely to regard people as having a great deal of difficulty in identifying it due to his own cultural baggage.

Propositional truths are suspect and there is a consciousness of the power being exercised in discourses. In this context, the claim of Evangelicals to be receiving the authoritative word of God can seem like an authoritarian attempt at control.

There is thus sometimes a shift from seeing the Bible as authoritative in the orthodox sense to a concern to address contemporary needs. Though more occupied with modern problems, such as alleged contradictions in the Bible, Kasemann demonstrates a radically altered concept of what ought to be in the canon when he suggests retaining

¹⁴ Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, p67

¹⁵ Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, p75

¹⁶ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, on-line lecture, p36

¹⁷ Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, p186

¹⁸ Jensen, *The Revelation of God*, p186

within it books which he does not think convey the essential message of Christianity so as to act as a foil against which the teaching of other New Testament books can be focused for the sake of speaking to the contemporary situation¹⁹.

For some, a broad canon is seen as important to hear the many different voices of Scripture. Metzger disparages attempts at harmonising the witness of the Bible and questions why the New Testament should have to be consistent in all its parts²⁰. The obvious modern answer would be that it claims to be the words of God and that any mutually exclusive teaching found within its pages would demonstrate this view to be false. For Metzger, however, Christianity was always theologically plural and the differences in Scripture speak in fruitful ways to different needs in different periods of the church. As Krister Stendahl puts it, one should not look for a master key with which to open all the doors of the canon. He contends that the notion of a centre in the canon is a hermeneutical mirage. Rather, the Scriptures provides a whole set of keys and the canon serves as the key ring. Changing the analogy, Metzger warns of the impoverishment that would result from “muting voices in the choir of witnesses the church has long found to be normative”²¹. When one asks why we should have this particular key ring or choir, the answer is not always clear.

An excessive consciousness of the so-called hermeneutical gap effectively emasculates the canon, if it is thought not to communicate God’s word effectively to present-day believers. Marxsen, for example, argues that no book in the New Testament aims to speak directly to the present-day reader and that to use it as an authoritative norm for today would be contrary to the intentions of those who wrote it.

According to Bruce Metzger’s summary of Marxsen’s proposed alternative principle on canonicity, “... the real test for discerning what is authoritative is whether the kerygma existentially confronts me in my situation”²² Metzger correctly points out that the New Testament writers did not intend what Marxsen argues for either!

A brief response: God’s canonical word is intended for his people

However, if the above analysis is correct, and the Bible is intended by God to function as the perpetual covenantal constitution by which his people are ruled and the gospel is validated, then the objection based on the hermeneutical-gap is excluded, since it is necessary to think that the word of God must be sufficient for the purpose for which Almighty God gave it. If God is the Lord, then his sovereignty must also extend to human language and texts and it is reasonable to think that he can use them to achieve his purposes.

In addition, there are also specific occasions where Biblical writers express a consciousness that what they are recording is intended by God for subsequent generations. For example, Isaiah is told that his oracle is to be of permanent import: “Go

¹⁹ see the discussion of this in Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, p278

²⁰ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, p278

²¹ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, p280

²² Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, p277

now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness.” (Isaiah 30:8; also Habakkuk 2:2f).

There are also occasions when Biblical writers explicitly draw on previous events recorded in the Scriptures as intended particularly for the present generation. Speaking of the events of the Exodus and Israel’s time in the wilderness, the Apostle Paul says: “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come.” (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11). According to Paul, then, these particular Scripturally recorded incidents were intended by God to perform a controlling function for the final eschatological people of God, rather than only being able to address the original recipients.

Indeed, every time the Bible makes use of Scripture from a previous time in salvation history²³, the continuing relevance of that text is implicitly indicated. Clearly the Bible writers think that the Bible was given to effectively communicate God’s truth in an on-going canonical manner. This is especially evident in verses such as Hebrews 3:7, where the writer quotes as determinative the words of the author of Psalm 95 with the introduction, “as the Holy Spirit says”. The present tense suggests that the Psalm is seen as God’s Word to his people today, rather than merely that of the human author centuries earlier addressing their own particular concerns.

Paul generalises this principle in Romans 15:5: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Similarly, according to Romans 3:2, there is great advantage for the Jewish people as “they have been entrusted with the very words of God.” It seems implicit here that their advantage involves them being able to receive as canonical this word through the on-going generations, rather than merely the honour of preserving a document which no longer meaningfully addresses them.

The warnings not to edit the words of the Biblical books already cited also imply that their authors envisaged them as an on-going deposit. The Pastoral Epistles also have a sense of passing on and establishing a normative tradition, for example, in a series of trustworthy sayings (1 Timothy 1:15; 3:1; 4:9 etc.) and in the pattern of sound teaching which is to be retained and guarded (2 Timothy 1:14f).

Whilst our cultural situations are obviously not identical with those of the original recipients of the word of God, it is misleading to emphasise the supposed “gap” to the exclusion of more important continuities. God’s word is addressed to his people who, in important ways, continue to relate to Him as did former generations. God is unchanging (e.g. Psalm 102:25-27; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17). The human condition is not radically altered by cultural change. With proper hermeneutics, then, the Bible remains the effective canon as which it was given by God to His church²⁴.

²³ Many examples of this could be given. Many texts which would be of relevance here are cited below when the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament is considered.

²⁴ For further defence of the viability of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God in a post-modern context see e.g. Don Carson, *The Gagging of God* and Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning In This Text?*

The production of the canon an historical accident

Liberals sometimes emphasise that the formation of the canon was a gradual human process in which the church was subject to external pressures and wish to draw reductionistic inferences.

The impulse for the formation of the canon itself, for example, is often attributed to the fight against heresy and the increasing need which the early church felt to define its teaching in contrast to movements such as, Gnosticism, Montanism or Marcionism²⁵.

Response: God's sovereignty over human history

The relative influence of such external factors is open to some historical debate, but it has already been argued that the concept of a canon is intrinsic to Biblical religion, even if events sometimes aided this recognition or influenced the position of particular works.

Further, it must be seen that the fact that the formation of the canon was a human process that occurred in history does not necessarily cast doubt upon the validity of the outcome of the process.

It is characteristic of Biblical thought that God works in and through history, even through events that might not obviously seem part of his purposes. The crucifixion is of course the supreme example of this (e.g. Acts 2:23), but others could also be given, such as the actions of Joseph's brothers (Genesis 50:20). Thus, even if one were to conclude that particular books were included in the canon for the wrong reasons, from a human point of view, this would not necessarily exclude the view that they properly belong to God's authoritatively established canon. Many would say this was in fact the case with the Epistle to Hebrews, which seems to have been accepted as canonical at least by some and to some extent as it was thought to have been written by the Apostle Paul, which most modern scholars doubt. The Evangelical would argue that God is the Sovereign Lord of History and that all its apparent twists and turns are subject to his providential ordering of events²⁶.

Similarly, simply because the formation of the canon involves human beings, this does not mean that God does not infallibly stand behind it. Even if "to err is human", this does not necessarily imply that all genuinely human decisions and actions are erroneous. A religion with the incarnation at its heart must surely concede this point. Just as Evangelicals hold that by the inspiration of Scripture human beings wrote words that were infallibly divine, it is open to them to hold that sinful humans arrived at the contents of the canon infallibly. Particular incidences from the process of the formation of the canon need not undermine confidence in its accuracy.

²⁵ See Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, Chapter IV, *Influences on the Development of the Canon*, p75ff

²⁶ See Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (IVP)

Liberal searches for a canon

Liberal theologians may wish to retain the current canon and to say that in some sense it remains normative. A modified notion of “the canon” operates. That is, the Bible might be regarded as, at least to some extent, historically foundational and formative for the believing community. It is then thought appropriate that the Church should continue to interact with this early witness, but not that she is constrained to submit to its propositional truth claims as the infallible utterances of God.

Liberals sometimes argue that while the Bible cannot be identified as the words of God, it contains or witnesses to the Word of God. Some principle for determining what is truly canonical is then sought, often within (or on the basis of) the canon. Bruce Metzger describes this attempt to find a standard or centre thus: “To find a canon within the canon, therefore, means to find in Scripture a principle of hermeneutic that enables one to draw a line between what is authoritative within the canon and what is not.”²⁷ Marxsen, for example, argues that “the real canon is prior to the New Testament, and we are nearer to it in the sources the Synoptists used than in the synoptic gospels themselves.”²⁸

In a particularly striking paragraph, Thomas Jefferson also speaks of identifying what is valuable from the recorded teaching of Jesus: “Among the sayings and discourses imputed to Him by His biographers, I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and of the most lovely benevolence; and others, again, of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism, and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same Being. I separate, therefore, the gold from the dross; restore to Him the former, and leave the latter to the stupidity of some, and roguery of others, of His disciples.”²⁹ The prominence of the personal pronoun here shows that Jefferson, not the word of God, is functioning as the authority in this situation. It is his prior determination of what is moral, fine and lovely which is used to determine what Jesus would have said.

As in the above example, then, the liberal attempt to identify the canonical word of God often involves depending on human judgements.

Response: man’s inability to adjudicate what is the Word of God

It is not clear that man is naturally capable of recognising the word of God. This is especially so when the infinite dissimilarity between man and God is recalled (e.g. Isaiah 55:8). As Calvin argues: “God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word”³⁰.

²⁷ p276

²⁸ quoted in Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, p276

²⁹ From David Field’s CD 1.1 Scripture Lecture, (Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth Extracted Textually from the Gospels* – quoted by Richard Hays in “The Corrected Jesus”, *First Things* 43, 1994, pp. 43-48)

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol 1, p79 (1.7.4), quoting Hilary of Poitiers, *On The Trinity*

The Evangelical view of fallen human nature also makes it unlikely that man would be able to recognise the word of God reliably. The Westminster Confession emphasises man's "original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil" (VI, iv). The noetic effects of The Fall should not be overlooked. The Bible clearly teaches the deceptiveness of the human heart (Jeremiah 17:9; also 3:17; 7:24). Far from embracing the word of God, our natural fallen tendency would be to avoid, distort and suppress the truth (John 3:19; Romans 1:18ff).

Evangelicals will also be inclined to consider it problematic that on some liberal reconstructions "it is only the scientifically trained scholar who is capable of going behind the present Gospels [or other texts] to ascertain the original apostolic testimony"³¹. In contrast (as has been shown above) Evangelicals see the people of God having been granted a right to the Word of God by their Lord.

It may also be telling that, on some liberal views, for the majority of its history the church has been without the access to what ought to have been her true canon, which scholarly research has to some extent allegedly uncovered. The believer might doubt that God would allow his church to be thus deceived and deprived, even if he did not hold to the notion that the Church is impeccable.

The claims of liberal scholars to adjudicate as to what is properly normative are undermined by their lack of consensus regarding what forms any authoritative core³². This suggests the inability of rational human insight to reliably identify the Word of God.

Again, it is difficult to see how, on this view, the Scriptures could function as an effective authority. It seems, rather, to be human judgements (including subconscious prejudices) that are decisive. Evangelicals will regard this as a blasphemous rejection of the Word of God and an attempt to subvert his Lordship.

Roman Catholic Proposals: Tradition & Institutional Authority

The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church officially teaches, in its Catechism of 1992, that: "(120) It was by the apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings are to be included in the list of the sacred books."³³ According to paragraphs 75 to 79 of the

³¹ Metzger, p276. This is a comment particularly on Willi Marxsen's notion of the canon within the canon, but the same is true of many other attempts to provide some norm other than the Scriptures themselves.

³² For example, in his brief survey, Metzger considers the different proposals of Kummel, Braun and Marxsen, in *The Canon of the New Testament*, p276.

³³ Note also: (paragraph 150) ... "For Holy Mother Church, relying on the faith of the apostolic age, accepts as sacred and canonical the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts, on the grounds that, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author, and have been handed on as such to the Church herself." [70] It is presumably held that the books

Catechism, the Apostolic Tradition is the oral and written teaching of the apostles, passed on faithfully by the Church through the apostolic succession of bishops under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The belief seems to be that the oral Tradition has been present from the Apostles themselves. The Church appears to hold that the Apostles authoritatively directed the Church as to which specific books should be contained in the canon.

According to the Church, the bishops in succession to the apostles share the same authoritative teaching role as the apostles themselves. As paragraph 77 says, "They gave them their own position of teaching authority".

According to Roman Catholic dogma, the Church is also particularly enlightened by the Spirit to faithfully preserve and transmit the Word of God (that is, in written Scripture and oral Tradition) that He has entrusted to it (paragraphs 81, 82).

Knowledge of God, then, does not depend on Scripture alone but also on tradition: (paragraph 95) "It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls." It is clear in the particular case of the question of the contents of the canon, the Church's knowledge is thought to depend on the Word of God in the orally transmitted teaching of the Apostles telling the Church the parameters of the written Word of God. For the believer today, the institutional Church authoritatively tells him what the written words of God are.

According to the Catechism, the whole people of God is also especially enabled to correctly receive the Word of God: "(paragraphs 91-92) All the faithful share in understanding and handing on revealed truth. They have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit, who instructs them and guides them into all truth. The whole body of the faithful. . . cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of faith (*sensus fidei*) on the part of the whole people, when, from the bishops to the last of the faithful, they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals." (93) "By this appreciation of the faith, aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, the People of God, guided by the sacred teaching authority (Magisterium),. . . receives. . . the faith, once for all delivered to the saints. . . The People unfailingly adheres to this faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgement, and applies it more fully in daily life."

After giving instruction on how Scripture is rightly to be interpreted, the Catechism emphasises the authoritative role of the Church: "For, of course, all that has been said about the manner of interpreting Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgement of the Church which exercises the divinely conferred commission and ministry of *watching over* and interpreting the Word of God. "But I would not believe in the Gospel, had not

of Scripture have been entrusted to the Church both by God the Holy Spirit and by the Apostles (in their oral teaching in the Tradition).

the authority of the Catholic Church already moved me”³⁴. (paragraph 119, emphasis added). If there were to be a dispute over the contents of the canon, the Catechism implies that the Magisterium would be qualified to adjudicate.

It should also be noted, of course, that (on the basis of Apostolic Tradition) the Roman Catholic Church includes the books of the Apocrypha in the Old Testament, thus: “(paragraph 120) This complete list is called the canon of Scripture. It includes 46 books for the Old Testament (45 if we count Jeremiah and Lamentations as one) and 27 for the New. The Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi.”

Responses

A number of objections can be made to the official teaching of the Roman Catholic on how the canonical words of God are to be recognised.

Protestants will argue that the Roman Catholic system gives an excessively high place to the role of tradition and the teaching authority of the church.

Obviously it would not be disputed that the apostles exercised an oral teaching ministry. This is demonstrated by the Acts of the Apostles and referred to a number of times in their epistles.

Further, it would seem that the apostles and the church regarded their oral teaching as just as binding as their written words³⁵. In 1 Corinthians 4:18-5:5, for example, the Apostle Paul gives written teaching which he would, it seems, have given in person if he were able. He plans to go to Corinth “very soon, if the Lord is willing”. The language he uses about his parousia makes it absurd to think that his epistle has greater authority than his oral teaching would have had. In 2 Timothy 1:13, “what you [Timothy] *heard* from me [the Apostle Paul]”, he is to keep as the pattern of sound teaching (emphasis added). The Apostle’s oral teaching is here held up as normative and is indeed to be passed on by succeeding pastor-teachers. Similarly, the Thessalonian Christians are to “hold to the teachings we [Paul, Silas and Timothy] passed on to you, whether *by word of mouth* or by letter”. (emphasis added)

However, non-Roman Catholics would argue that it is impossible for us to know the full content of the binding oral teaching of the Apostles. From a purely human point of view, it seems unlikely that a body of oral tradition could be passed on accurately for two millennia. If this were to take place, a special work of God would seem to be required, which is not clearly promised in Scripture. Indeed, if the apostolic succession

³⁴ This quotation from Augustine comes in the context of the opposition of Manicheism. Calvin argues that here Augustine is speaking as if he were an unbeliever. See Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol 1, p76f (1.7.3)

³⁵ The authority of the apostles is further considered below.

has indeed operated reliably, the Roman Catholic bishops ought to be able to narrate exhaustively and precisely what the apostles transmitted as binding tradition.

Rather than depending entirely on oral transmission, it seems reasonable to think that the desire to preserve their teaching for future generations may have been part of the apostles impulse to write (though admittedly the need to communicate with churches in other places is a more common theme in the New Testament). Thus, for example, Luke³⁶'s gospel seems to aim at a reliable account for those who do not belong to the first eye-witness generation (Luke 1:1-4). Similarly, those who read the testimony of the Fourth Gospel have access to the eye-witness record of the Beloved Disciple though they have not seen for themselves (John 20:29-31). As has been shown above, in the Pastoral Epistles³⁷ there is a sense of the responsibility to guard the gospel being passed it on to the next generation and the Apostle Paul seems frequently to have been mindful of the possibility of his own death (e.g. Philippians 1:20-25; 2:17). Arguably, it would seem odd if those Apostles who wrote would not have recorded important teaching for posterity, but depended on word of mouth.

It seems likely that the Apostles would indeed have given some oral indication to the Church concerning which books ought to be received as the words of God. Certainly some teaching relevant to this matter is preserved in their writings in Colossians 4:16; 2 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Peter 3:16. However, it may reasonably be doubted whether the apostles told the early Christian churches a full and complete list of the books which form the New Testament, as the Catechism seems to teach when it says that the books are received on the basis of the oral teaching of the apostles (see on paragraph 120 and following, above). Certainly that the Apostles gave this teaching cannot be demonstrated. If they did, and it was a secure part of the tradition, it makes the gradual formation of canon lists and existence of some disputes more difficult to understand. This would also mean that all of the New Testament documents must have been in existence (or at least being projected) in the lifetime of the apostles, which many scholars would doubt.

It is not clear that the notion of a formally ordained episcopate in an unbroken succession to the apostles and sharing their authority is discernible in the New Testament. Though apostolic delegates appear in the New Testament, it is not clear that the apostles were able to transmit the ability to teach infallibly³⁸; rather they present their emissaries as having proved trustworthy (e.g. Colossians 4:7-9, 12-13). The whole people of God and especially all pastor-teachers are to share in the apostolic succession in the sense that they must hold to and promote the original teaching of the apostles, rather than particular individuals continuing in an office which has the same authority as the uniquely foundational apostles (c.f. Acts 1:20-22).

³⁶ Of course, Luke was not an apostle, but as is suggested below, he is known to have belonged to the apostolic circle and is often thought to have written with apostolic blessing.

³⁷ These arguments are particularly strong if traditional views of authorship, of the Fourth Gospel by the Apostle John and the Pastoral Epistles by the Apostle Paul, are accepted.

³⁸ As is discussed below, the apostles ability to authorise others or to validate the work of others is also related to the criterion of "apostolicity" in determining the canon.

Historical doubts could also be raised about the idea that an apostolic succession of ordinations has in fact operated or, for example, the connected idea that the Apostle Peter was the first bishop of Rome.

The “tradition” in the Pastoral Epistles seems to be the gospel word of God, rather than a set of additional doctrines that are communicated to would-be bishops.

The Catechism’s notion of the Apostolic Succession does not seem to have been held from earliest times. Those who, on the Roman Catholic scheme, would be thought to share in the apostolic succession, and hence the apostles’ authority, sometimes explicitly deny it. For example, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote c. AD 110 To The Romans: “I do not order you as did Peter and Paul; they were apostles.” (4.3)³⁹. Though of course it is true to say that he was not an apostle, he ought to have been able to issue authoritative apostolic commands according to paragraph 77 of the Catechism. If the test of apostolicity (see below) is accepted, this further emphasises the uniquely foundational authority of the apostles. Recognition of books penned by the apostles as canonical in the early church seems to support this understanding of the apostles’ uniqueness and hence undermines the notion of an Apostolic Succession.

The authority and impeccability claimed by the Church in Roman Catholic theology also seems to be without a basis in the New Testament. In the context of The Farewell Discourse, for example, it seems best to limit the promises of John 14:26; 16:12-15 to the Apostles, who were their original recipients, rather than to “all the faithful”, to whom the Catechism seems to attribute them in paragraph 91. This is especially the case as the promises may be bound to their place in salvation history, both in the sense that the apostles could not bare more teaching before the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ and that they were to exercise a foundational ministry in the Church. In particular, the promise that the Holy Spirit will remind them of what Jesus has said seems to make better sense if applied to the Apostles, who after all have at least heard the oral teaching of the historical Jesus, whereas many of John’s readers have not done so⁴⁰.

Contrary to the Roman Catholic Church’s high view of the authority of the church, the warnings and corrections in the New Testament, suggest the primitive congregations frequently in danger of serious errors.

The extent of unity and doctrinal faithfulness affirmed in the Catechism also seems historically doubtful. There certainly were some disputed books in the Early Church, as for example, the lists given by Eusebius show.

The formal acceptance of the Apocrypha as part of the Old Testament as late as the Council of Trent in 1546⁴¹ also seems to cast doubt on the universal agreement as to the contents of the canon from apostolic times.

³⁹ quoted in Grudem, Systematic Theology, p66

⁴⁰ These considerations also apply to the way the Charismatic tradition might claim continuing words from God about the written word of God on the basis of these verses.

⁴¹ see J I Packer, “Scripture” in the IVP Dictionary of Theology

The Roman Catholic view of Tradition also seems to sit uneasily with the polemic of Jesus against the Pharisees, whom he criticises for prioritising the traditions of man over the Word of God (e.g. Matthew 15:6; c.f. Matthew 23)⁴².

The Roman Catholic Church also rejects the biblical doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture (e.g. 2 Timothy 3:16) by arguing that Apostolic Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church are necessary for believers to rightly receive the Word of God.

Though formally maintaining the authority of Scripture, the Roman Catholic Church departs from the principle of *sola scriptura* (the supreme authority of the Bible) and effectively limits the functional authority of Scripture to areas in which the Tradition does not speak. If the Roman Catholic system is accepted, it is difficult to see how the Church could be effectively reformed by Scripture where it claims to have access to Apostolic Tradition.

Indeed, the Roman Catholic would not see this as a legitimate objection. For the Roman Catholic Church, Scripture and Apostolic Tradition must always be in harmony as they have a common source, namely God himself⁴³. As paragraph 80 says: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal." Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own "always, to the close of the age". Thus, for the Roman Catholic, a case in which Apostolic Tradition must be reformed by the Scriptures cannot arise; since God has spoken both authoritatively, they will have a consistent voice.

However, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that local traditions are governed by the Tradition. On Apostolic Tradition and ecclesial traditions, the Catechism says, at paragraph 83: "The Tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus' teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit. The first generation of Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition. Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical or devotional traditions, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium."

It is interesting that the guidance to shape local traditions is said here to come from Tradition (i.e. Apostolic Tradition) and the Church's official teaching office. To Protestant ears it is striking that the reference here should not be to the clear and supreme Word of God written. It is tempting to think that the choice made here in the Catechism reflects the practical priority given to the teaching of the Church. The written Word of God is, after all, only identified and understood by the teaching of the Church

⁴² see also John Stott, *Christ The Controversialist* (Leicester, IVP). These sermons also include incisive suggestions as to how the Word of God is abolished to make way for the traditions of men today.

⁴³ A corresponding claim would often be made by Christians in other traditions for the teaching of the Word and the Spirit.

and hence its power in the Church seems to be practically restricted, though theoretically acknowledged.

It should be noted that paragraph 86 of the Catechism explicitly states that: "Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God⁴⁴, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it." However, this order would only be absolutely maintained if the Magisterium were not to require anything that was not taught in the Word of God. For example, the freedoms given to the believer by Scripture might be removed by the official teaching of the Church, the concern expressed in Article VI of the Church of England.⁴⁵

Given the absence of promises in Scripture that the church will have infallible authority to determine the limits of the canon, Evangelicals would argue that the church's judgements on which words are really the words of God are really the accumulation of the opinions of men. As Calvin says: "... a most pernicious error widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church. As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decisions of men!"⁴⁶. This being the case, the objections made above to liberal attempts to adjudicate on what is the word of God would apply equally here.

Rather than the Bible being supported by the word of the Church, the Biblical model would be that the people of God were called into being by the word of God. The church is "built on the foundations of the prophets and apostles" (Ephesians 2:20). It would therefore seem an inversion of the God-given order if the believer's confidence in the words of God depended on the church, which is created, supported and governed by that word, as the above analysis has already suggested.

Evangelical Proposals: Revelation & Scripture

Although the characteristics of Evangelicalism are much discussed⁴⁷, it is agreed that it regards Scripture as supremely normative. Evangelicals will naturally want, therefore, to arrive at a Biblical canon of Scripture. The nature of the Bible makes this no simple matter. The Scriptures do not contain a table of contents. However, the Bible does contain a considerable degree of self-attestation. That is, a number of Bible books quote from or refer to other sections of the Bible in such a way that suggests that the text in question is regarded as the canonical word of God. The Bible also makes repeated statements about God's word generally (including his written word) as authoritative and normative (and hence canonical).

⁴⁴ Which, it must be recalled, for the Catechism means Scripture and the Apostolic Tradition

⁴⁵ Some of the arguments which might be made by Charismatic Christians (on the basis of experience and the Spirit) could have been examined in a separate section at this point. However, these arguments have been considered under the heading of the Testimony of the Spirit, a characteristically Evangelical doctrine set out below.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol 1, p75 (1.7.1)

⁴⁷ E.g. see J I Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, chapter 1

The Self-Attestation of Scripture⁴⁸

The Old Testament's attestation of the words of God

The Old Testament Scriptures are often presented by their authors as the authoritative Words of God.

The Old Testament reports direct speech from God to men and women (e.g. Genesis 1:28-30; 3:9-19; Exodus 3:1-4:23; 20:1-4). This shows that the Old Testament presents God as using human language and communicating with men and women not by means of ideas alone but through specific words. These passages never view human language as a barrier to effective communication by God.

The Old Testament prophets are simply presented as receiving words from God and passing them on to men and women reliably. It is every word that is thought of as having come from God (e.g. Deuteronomy 18:18-20; Jeremiah 1:9; 14:14; 23:16-40; Numbers 23:38; Ezekiel 2:7; 3:4; 1 Kings 16:34; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; 17:23; 24:2; 2 Chronicles 29:25; Ezra 9:10-11; Nehemiah 9:30; Zechariah 7:7).

What the prophet says in God's name, God says. Prophets often speak for God in the first person (e.g. 2 Samuel 7:4-16; 2 Kings 17:13; 19:25-8, 34; 21:12-15; 22:12-20).

God is said to speak through the prophets. To disbelieve the prophets is to disbelieve God (e.g. Deuteronomy 18:19; 1 Samuel 10:8; 13:13-14; 15:3, 19, 23).

According to the Old Testament itself, these words of God can be written down (e.g. Exodus 24:4; 34:27; 33:2; Joshua 24:26; Jeremiah 30:2; 29:1; 36:1-32; 45:1; 51:60; Ezekiel 43:11).

The title "word of God" can refer to God's direct speech to men or His speech through prophets or the written record of His speech through prophets. Since the first two of these are not preserved these verses probably have primary reference to the third (e.g. Numbers 23:19; 2 Samuel 15:29; Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Psalm 12:6; 18:30; 119:89, 96, 140, 160; Proverbs 8:8; 30:5; Isaiah 66:2).

Clearly, then, the Old Testament writers had a concept of the entirely trustworthy and utterly authoritative written Word of God. It is evident that God's written words were regarded as canonical (that is, perpetually authoritative) for his people. However, commenting on the extent of the canon, Grudem says: "There is not yet [i.e. in the Old Testament itself] an indication of how much of our present Old Testament would be included in the intention of these authors when they speak of "God's words", especially God's words in written form. A final determination of the question is difficult to find within the limits of the Old Testament text itself"⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Some of the arguments and examples in this section are drawn from Wayne Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation" in Carson & Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*. Grudem's focus is especially on the authority of Scripture, though he gives some discussion of the extent of the canon.

⁴⁹ Grudem in Carson & Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth*, p36

The New Testament's attestation of the Old Testament

The New Testament writers seem to accept the present Evangelical Old Testament canon as the words of God.

The extent of attestation is impressive. The New Testament contains approximately 250 quotations and more than 900 allusions to the Old Testament⁵⁰.

Many specific Old Testament passages are quoted in the New Testament explicitly as the words of God. See, for example, Matthew 1:22, quotes Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 4:4 on Jesus' citations from Deuteronomy; Acts 1:16 quotes Psalm 69:25 and 109:8; Acts 2:16f quotes Joel 2:28-32; Acts 4:25 quotes Psalm 2:1-2; Acts 13:47 quotes Isaiah 49:6; Acts 28:25; Acts 28:25 on Isaiah the prophet; Romans 9:17 quotes Exodus 9:16; 1 Corinthians 9:8-10 quotes Deuteronomy 25:4; Hebrews 1:6-7 quotes Deuteronomy 32:43 and Psalm 104:4.

Similarly, the New Testament also endorses various details of the Old Testament as authentically prophetic when it asserts that they were fulfilled in Christ. Examples include Micah 5:2 in Matthew 2:5; Zechariah 9:9 in John 12:14-15; Psalm 41:9 in John 13:18; Psalm 22:18 in John 19:24; Psalm 34:20 in John 19:36; Zechariah 12:10 in John 19:37. Although they are not explicitly cited as fulfilments, Psalm 69:21 is alluded to in John 19:28-30 as is Isaiah 53:9 in Matthew 27:57-60.

A great many details from the Old Testament are also referred to as historical in the New Testament, seemingly because they are recorded in the text of the Bible, which the authors receive as trustworthy⁵¹. Grudem concludes that the extent of this usage shows "a willingness on the part of the New Testament writers to rely on the truthfulness of *any part of the historical narratives of the Old Testament.*" (emphasis added).

In addition to these specific endorsements of verses as words of God, the New Testament also refers to the Old Testament in a manner that is consistent with the notion of plenary inspiration and may be thought to imply it. For example, in the New Testament we find argumentation that depends on particular words and letters being truly the utterances of God. Thus, for example, the argument in Matthew 22:44-45 (and parallels) depends on the fact that David rightly calls the Messiah "my Lord" in Psalm 110:1. As Grudem explains, "Here Jesus' argument depends on the reliability of one of the letters of the written Old Testament."⁵²

Having examined the New Testament's use of and teaching concerning the Old Testament, Grudem attempts to answer the question: "How much of the Old Testament is said [by New Testament writers] to be worthy of belief by New Testament Christians?". He concludes that: "The citations listed above from all parts of the Old Testament are enough to indicate inductively that all of the Old Testament was treated

⁵⁰ from Dunbar in Carson & Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority & Canon*, p305

⁵¹ Grudem gives a list of such details on pp 42-43 of *Scripture and Truth*

⁵² Grudem in *Scripture and Truth*, p41

by the New Testament authors as (1) words that God Himself spoke and (2) reliable in whatever they represented as having happened.”⁵³

A number of New Testament texts also speak in broad terms of the contents of our Old Testament as authoritative. For example, in Luke 24:44, Jesus speaks of the necessity of the fulfilment of all that is written about him in “the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms.” (see also Acts 3:18; Acts 24:14; Romans 15:4). This seems to be a deliberately inclusive way of speaking which would suggest that the Hebrew Bible as a whole is in view. In Luke 24:25, the disciples are rebuked by Jesus for not believing “all the prophets have spoken”. Then, according to verse 27, Jesus used “all the Scriptures” to teach them about himself.

Grudem comments: “Although it is difficult to define the limits of the Old Testament canon from data within the Old Testament itself, it is not difficult to demonstrate that for first century Jews the canon of the Old Testament included exactly the books of the Protestant Old Testament today.”⁵⁴

When the New Testament writers refer in general to the authoritative nature of Scripture (e.g. in 2 Timothy 3:16), it seems reasonable to think that they were able to do so as the contents of Scripture was generally agreed and their readers would have known to which works they were referring.

The New Testament’s Attestation of Itself

There are considerable indications that the New Testament writers regarded their writings as equal to the Old Testament in character and authority.

As is the case in the Old Testament, the New Testament shows an awareness that God speaks directly to people through human language (e.g. Matthew 3:17 and parallels; Matthew 17:5 and parallels; 2 Peter 1:17-18; John 12:28; Acts 9:4; 26:14-18; 9:11-16; 10:13; 18:9-10; Revelation 1:11-3:22).

God’s word is also held to be spoken by human beings: by Jesus (e.g. Matthew 5:22; Luke 5:1; John 3:34; 6:63, 68; 8:47; 12:48-50; 14:10, 24; 15:22; 17:8, 14) and by the apostles (e.g. Matthew 10:19-2; Luke 10:16; John 17:8; Acts 2:41; 4:29, 31; 2 Corinthians 13:3; Galatians 1:8-11; 1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Grudem argues that in asking whether or not the New Testament writers thought of their own words and the other words of the New Testament as the words of God, we are in a position analogous to that which arose with the Old Testament: “It is possible to show that some of the New Testament writings are thought to be God’s words, but one cannot prove conclusively that all of the New Testament writings [accepted by Evangelicals today] were so regarded, at least not by using the data of the New Testament alone.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Grudem in Scripture and Truth, p44

⁵⁴ Grudem in Scripture and Truth, p44

⁵⁵ Grudem in Scripture and Truth, p45

In 2 Peter 3:2, “the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles” is placed alongside “the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets”. As the prophets’ words were written, it is reasonable, though admittedly not necessary, to think of written apostolic words here. In 2 Peter 3:115-16, “all of his [Paul’s] epistles” are included alongside “the other Scriptures [*tas loipas graphas*]” as containing God-given wisdom.

The Apostle Paul also claims to speak “not in words taught by human wisdom but by the Spirit” in 1 Corinthians 2:13. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul claims to give reliable instruction even without direct words from Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 14:37-38, he requires his readers to acknowledge that what he is writing to them is “the command of the Lord”. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, the Apostle Paul seems to claim that he is speaking words that are also the very words of the Lord.

Strikingly, 1 Timothy 5:18 seems to quote the exact words of Luke 10:7 as “Scripture”. The term used here, *graphe*, is used 50 times in the New Testament, always to refer to the written words of God.

There is strong evidence, then, that many of the New Testament writings were regarded as authoritative by New Testament writers. There are also indications that the writings of the New Testament were to come to be regarded as authoritative words of God⁵⁶. However, one cannot demonstrate the canonicity of every New Testament text by its attestation elsewhere in the New Testament.

Even if one were to be impressed by Scripture’s self-attestation, one could still ask how the words of Scripture themselves used to authenticate other words of Scripture are known to be the words of God.

Scripture Attested By Christ

One response to the apparent problem of the Christian view of Scripture depending on Scripture is to argue that Scripture was authenticated by the Historical Jesus⁵⁷.

This is the approach developed by John Wenham in *Christ and The Bible*. Though Wenham’s work focuses on the authority of the Bible, his approach and many of his specific conclusions are applicable to the question of which words are truly the words of God. Wenham contends that given their obligation of accepting Jesus as Lord, Christians ought to regard Jesus’ attitude to the Bible as determinative of their own.

Both the accommodation theory (that Jesus is fitting in with his hearers’ attitudes to Scripture) and the kenosis theory (that Jesus had so emptied himself of his divine knowledge that he shared in the erroneous views of Scripture held in his day) are rightly rejected. It is shown, for example, that Jesus often challenged, rather than shared in, the misconceptions of his day. Even though Jesus acknowledged his ignorance of the time of the *eschaton* in Mark 13:32, he and his apostles also taught his authority. To admit Jesus’ ignorance in this matter is clearly not the same as allowing that he positively taught error.

⁵⁶ see further below on the authority of the apostles

⁵⁷ That is, as Evangelicals might prefer, the Incarnate Christ during his earthly ministry.

Beginning by treating the Bible as an ordinary historical record⁵⁸, Wenham argues that there can be little doubt that Jesus of Nazareth regarded our Old Testament as the entirely trustworthy words of God. The historical case for this is especially strong as his statements about the authority of the Hebrew Bible pervade all strata of the gospels, making it unlikely that they are redactional, and are sometimes incidental to the main point being made (e.g. Matthew 4:4; 5:17-20; 19:5; Luke 24:25; John 5:45-47; 10:35⁵⁹).

The view that the accepted canon of the Hebrew Bible at the time of Jesus was the same as that received by Evangelicals today is defended by Roger Beckwith in *The Old Testament Canon in the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism*. The verses cited above also show Jesus' willingness to quote from all parts of the present Evangelical Old Testament and to speak of the Hebrew Bible inclusively as authoritative.

The New Testament also suggests that Jesus granted the Apostles the authority necessary to supervise its production⁶⁰.

The above considerations of the self-attestation of Scripture and Jesus' attitude to the Bible are extremely helpful in establishing the notion of a canon, in identifying its outline and indicating much of its contents. However, these two criteria are not adequate for deciding disputed cases with complete rigour, or giving absolute certainty. For example, the usual dangers attached to arguments from silence would exist if one were to attempt to insist on the basis of the authority of the Historical Jesus that the Apocrypha should be rejected. Even if Jesus did not quote from some books, it is still conceivable that he regarded them as God-given. Further, it would be difficult to find specific dominical or Scriptural endorsement (from beyond its own pages) for the letter to the Hebrews.

Biblical principles for identifying the words of God

If the Bible does not specifically define its own contents, it might be argued that the Bible provides criteria which, when applied, allow God's words to be identified.

The words of a prophet must come true

Some conditions for authenticating the Word of God were given to the Old Testament people of God, for them to use when assessing prophetic utterances. The specific question "How can we know when a message has been spoken by the LORD?" is raised in Deuteronomy 18:21. The answer given is that "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him." (verse 22). This test is only applicable when the prophecy contains a predictive element, and

⁵⁸ For a defence of The Historical Reliability of The Gospels see the volume of that title, edited by Craig L. Blomberg

⁵⁹ see also many of the New Testament texts cited above (showing the New Testament view of the Old Testament) where the New Testament writers report Jesus' views

⁶⁰ The case for Apostolic authority is made below

can only be employed after the time between the prophecy and its supposed fulfilment has passed. It is also noteworthy that the test is framed negatively. It would presumably be misguided to think that any accurate prediction about the future authenticates the speaker as the mouthpiece of God: there could have been a lucky guess or even demonic influence.

Doctrinal consistency with previous revelation

Deuteronomy 13:1-3 also commands that prophets who say, “Let us follow other gods” should be executed, even if they successfully perform miraculous signs. It would seem to be legitimate to conclude from this that conformity to previous revelation is a necessary condition for a word to be accepted as from God. It seems likely that the early church was influenced by this test to exclude particular works from the New Testament. For example, Grudem argues that the Shepherd of Hermas was rightly excluded as it teaches the necessity of penance, seems to identify the Holy Spirit with the Son before the incarnation and holds that the trinity came into existence only after the humanity of Christ had been taken up into heaven⁶¹.

Again, this test, of doctrinal conformity, is not a sufficient condition for acceptance as canonical as a message may not be inspired even though it does not contradict the known word of God. Once again, the criterion can only be applied if there is already revelation that is known to be from God available. One could ask how the prior revelation is recognised as a word of God.

Apostolicity

It is often suggested that the New Testament canon is to be determined according to the principle of Apostolicity. For example, R. Laird Harris writes: “The principle of canonicity was inspiration... and the test of inspiration was authorship... by apostles”⁶².

Impressive evidence can be accumulated for the authority of the apostles, some of which has already been cited above. According to Herman Ridderboss, Christ himself established for his church “the formal authority structure” which would be “the source and standard for all future preaching of the gospel”, the apostolate (Mark 3:14; Acts 10:41; Eph 2:20) and pre-authenticated their spoken and written words. In the fourth gospel, the apostles are promised the special help of the Holy Spirit in teaching after Jesus’ departure (John 14:26; 16:12-15). God further authenticated the apostles by granting them the power to perform miracles (Acts 14:3; 2 Corinthians 12:12). In Acts 5:2-4, to lie to an apostle is equivalent to lying to the Holy Spirit and to God. The Apostle Paul also claims special revelation and authority for himself (1 Corinthians 2:9; 2:13; 14:37; 2 Corinthians 13:3; Romans 2:16; Galatians 1:8f; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 4:8, 15; 5:27; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14).

If Apostolic authorship is seen as a sufficient criteria for canonicity, then Matthew, John, Romans to Philemon, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation are to be included in the New Testament, if traditional views of authorship are accepted. The

⁶¹ Grudem, Systematic Theology, p66f, drawing on The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p641

⁶² from Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible, p280 quoted by Reymond in Systematic Theology, p65

position of James is more doubtful, but he seems to be considered an apostle in 1 Corinthians 15:7 and Galatians 1:19 and also fulfils functions appropriate to apostleship in Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 2:9,12.

This leaves Mark, Luke-Acts, Hebrews and Jude unaccounted for. The Epistle to the Hebrews was often included as canonical as it was thought to be the work of the Apostle Paul.

Often a wider notion of “apostolicity” is allowed. Even if a book is not thought to have been penned directly by an apostle, it may be regarded as “apostolic”, perhaps if it comes from the circle of the apostles and contains their teaching. Thus, from early times Mark was associated with the apostle Peter and Luke with the Apostle Paul and their writings were seemingly therefore acknowledged as “apostolic”. The letter of Jude appears to have been accepted because of Jude’s association with James and because he was the brother of Jesus.

The precise relationship and procedure by which non-apostolic authors’ writings may be included as “apostolic” is not clear. For example, should one think that some sort of formal endorsement was known to have been given or that the apostle was directly involved in the authorship of the work concerned?

However, some have questioned the grounds for thinking that the apostles were able to impart their teaching authority to others. Presumably the response to this would be that the Apostles were enabled by the Spirit to perceive when it was the will of God that he would grant inspiration to another of their circle. This notion of an apostolically validated group of authors has some similarities to the claim made by the Roman Catholic Church for the Apostles oral teaching about the extent of the canon and the apostolic succession by which their authority is passed on to others. Again, it must be said that the evidence for it is slender.

Also, according to this criterion of apostolicity, it is not obvious why some of the letters of Paul, such as the other parts of the Corinthian correspondence (1 Corinthians 5:9) or Laodicians (Colossians 4:16) were not included in the canon. Historically speaking, it was obvious that only those texts which were preserved could be included in the canon. It is debatable whether other texts ought ideally to be included and whether or not, for example, if a lost letter of Paul were to be found it ought to have been included.

Some Evangelicals have wanted to include preservation by the church perhaps under the direction of the apostles as a proper criterion for canonicity. Thus, for example, Warfield refines the position on apostolic authorship by saying: “the canon of the New Testament was completed when the last authoritative book was given to the church by the apostles.... The principle of canonicity was not apostolic authorship, but *imposition by the apostles as ‘law’*”. As Ned B. Stonehouse recognises, “... this view lacks specific confirmation from the available evidence...”⁶³.

⁶³ quoted by Dunbar in Carson & Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p357 from Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p415 and Stonehouse in “The Authority of the New Testament” in *The Infallible Word*, ed. Woolley, p97

Ridderboss argues that the apostolicity test of canonicity risks giving a human judgement authority over the Word of God: “no matter how strong the evidence for apostolicity (and therefore for canonicity) may be in many instances and no matter how forceful the arguments in favour of the apostolicity of certain other writings may be, historical judgements cannot be the final and sole ground for the church’s accepting the New Testament as canonical. To accept the New Testament on that ground would ultimately be basing its faith of the results of historical investigation”⁶⁴

The Westminster Confession’s teaching on the reception of the word of God

The Westminster Confession provides a classic evangelical statement on the recognition of the word of God, which seeks to avoid this problem. Chapter V states: “We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.”

Indications that the Bible is a divine book

Here, the testimony of the church and the nature of the content of the Biblical books are said to incline believers to their acceptance. These serve as indications that the books surpass merely human writings and display the qualities that one would expect of the words of God.

Though not absolutely unanimous, the testimony of the church does show a remarkable degree of unanimity regarding the contents of the canon. As Packer comments, the testimony of the people of God over time becomes weightier each year⁶⁵.

If tests such as the apostolicity of a particular text are being considered, one might argue on purely historical grounds (without accepting the sort of claims made by the Roman Catholic Church for the authority of the Church) that the Early Church was better placed than modern scholars to determine this issue and that her testimony ought to be influential.

This level of consensus throughout church history regarding the contents of the Word of God is especially impressive if it is accepted, as is argued below, that the Spirit of God causes the people of God to receive the Word of God. The extent to which Christians agree on the canon of Scripture could then be seen as a sign of the efficiency of the internal testimony of the Spirit which is believed to have operated.

⁶⁴ quoted in Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, p66

⁶⁵ Packer, *IVP Dictionary of Theology*, “Scripture”

“The consent of all the parts” of Scripture is also said by the confession to serve as an indication of its divine origin. Having one divine author, all the Scriptures must be harmonious. The necessity of doctrinal congruity has already been discussed above. If a passage were known to contradict a known Scripture, this would certainly show that it could not be the word of God. Though liberal scholars often make much of the alleged contradictions in the Bible, it is worth noting that others are impressed by its harmony. For example, Wayne Grudem comments: “... there are many evangelical Bible scholars today who will say that they do not presently know of any problem texts for which there is no satisfactory solution.... The present writer, for example, has during the last twenty years examined dozens of these “problem texts” that have been brought to his attention in the context of the inerrancy debate. In every one of these cases, upon close inspection of the text a plausible solution has become evident.”⁶⁶ The extent to which a particular passage is seen to compliment and illuminate other texts, might also encourage it to be received as the Word of God, but this confirmation will not necessarily always be available, as it would be possible for God to speak in a way which had little obvious relation to his other utterances and because a non-inspired writer might write something highly compatible with Scripture. Overall, however, the force of the confession’s statement is clear if it is considered, for example, how gloriously the Bible shows that Christ fulfils the Hebrew Scriptures (c.f. Luke 24:44f; 2 Corinthians 1:20).

Relying too much on the recognition of these indications of the divine origin of the words of Scripture tends to place too much emphasis on fallible human judgements, as has been argued above and as the Westminster Confession seems to emphasise. As Calvin says: “If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences – that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles – we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human judgement, or conjectures...”⁶⁷.

The Inward Witness of The Spirit

According to the Westminster Confession, however, “our full persuasion and assurance” of the divine character of the Scriptures is “from an inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts”.

The Bible’s teaching on the inward witness of the Spirit

The Bible clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit works in human hearts, regenerating individuals so that they are converted to faith in Christ (e.g. Matthew 17:17; John 3:5; 16:7-11; Acts 16:14; Romans 8:14-17; 1 Corinthians 2; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2:13; Titus 3:5). The Spirit thus enables the believer (or would-be believer) to accept the truth of the gospel. It is usual to speak of an ongoing work of illumination in believers (e.g. Matthew 11:25; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 1:18-19; 2 Timothy 2:7). The Bible also suggests the Spirit’s role in providing God’s people with assurance and bearing witness to the truth (e.g. 1 John 2:27; 5:7-10).

The traditional place of this doctrine

⁶⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p99

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol 1, p78 (1.7.4)

Though the doctrine of the inner testimony of the Spirit is especially associated with Calvin and his theological successors, Alan Richardson argues that it has always been part of the Church's faith: "[Calvin's] teaching that the Christian's recognition of the authority of the Bible is due to the working of the Holy Spirit in his heart gives classical expression to a doctrine which has been believed by Christians in every century... It is a doctrine of the whole Church ... one for which support could be found in the writings of practically every leading theologian of the Church in every age."⁶⁸ Packer adds: "... the Church has from the first professed to receive the Bible's testimony to its own divine origin, and believed that it was the Spirit who taught it to do so. The doctrine of the Spirit's witness to Scripture, thus understood, is and always was part of the catholic faith."⁶⁹

The nature of the witness of the Spirit

It is not easy to give a full and clear account of what is meant by the doctrine of the inner testimony of the Spirit. In a sense this is not surprising. As John Frame comments: "It should be said ... that the testimony of the Spirit works in the Spirit's typically mysterious way (John 3:8)"⁷⁰.

Although John 10 does not speak directly of the work of the Spirit, it may be that the efficacious hearing of Christ's voice which is described in the chapter should be seen as the result of the inner testimony of the Spirit (accompanying an objective presentation of the words of Christ, from Scripture for those who live after the time of the historical Jesus). In John 10:3, 16, 26, Jesus' sheep (his people) are said to hear his voice, knowing him to be their proper shepherd. The reader is told that the sheep know their shepherd's voice, whereas they will not follow a stranger, as they do not recognise his voice (v5). It is difficult to know how much this figure of speech tells us about how Christ's people recognise his voice. Though the passage may be applied to the saving call of Christ in the gospel (v9), the text as a whole seems to suggest the broader leading of God's people by the voice of Christ, as a shepherd would direct his flock. Believers' knowledge of Christ is compared to the Father and the Son's mutual knowledge in verse 15, which suggests a deep personal communion.

Clearly the statement is parabolic and it is probably beyond the scope of the metaphor to argue, for example, that just as sheep are able to recognise the shepherd's voice because they have heard him before, realise that he is trustworthy and so respond when they hear the same voice again, likewise Christians develop an increasing familiarity with and trust for the voice of Christ speaking in Scripture. Even if this is not obviously being taught in John 10, the view that maturing believers will increasingly recognise Christ addressing them in the Scriptures seems plausible. However, once again, one must ask how his voice is initially recognised.

⁶⁸ Quoted from *Christian Apologetics* (SCM, 1947), pp212ff by Packer in *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p122

⁶⁹ Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p122

⁷⁰ Frame in Carson and Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p234

Further, recognising the divine “voice” of Scripture is obviously different from differentiating the sound of one human voice from another. The matter of recognising the Word of God is even more complicated than trying to identify the works of a particular human author, as the Word of God has been given through a variety of human authors who have used their creative powers to a greater or lesser extent. It is therefore not possible to appeal to the divine prose style in seeking to determine whether or not a book is canonical.

“in our hearts”

The Confession describes this action of the Spirit as “inward”, “in our hearts”. Frame emphasises this by placing it within the framework of object (God’s saving actions), subject (God’s people) and norm (God’s word) in Christian theology. He writes: “... the testimony of the Spirit to the written Word has a specific function in this triadic structure [of object, subject and norm]. ... [T]he internal testimony... is focused on the *subject* of knowledge. The internal testimony is not new revealed words (norms...), nor is it a new saving act in history (object). Rather, in the internal testimony, the Spirit operates in our hearts and minds, in ourselves as subjects, to illumine and persuade us of the divine words and deeds.”⁷¹.

No attempt is made to say in the Westminster Confession what this work of the spirit feels like or how the believer is to recognise it.

Commenting on how the word of God is recognised by the believer, Calvin suggests the analogies of sight and taste: “Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.”⁷²

Packer tries to describe the Holy Spirit’s ministry as a witness to divine truth, thus: “It is a healing of spiritual faculties, a restoring to man of a permanent receptiveness towards divine things, a giving and sustaining of power to recognise and receive divine utterances for what they are. It is given in conjunction with the hearing or reading of such utterances, and the immediate fruit of it is an inescapable awareness of their divine origin and authority.... This witness is not, as is sometimes supposed, an inner voice, or a mystical experience, or merely that sense of being gripped and searched by particular passages.... It is, in fact... that enlightening action which is the root of all faith, in as much as it alone enables sinners to discern and respond to revealed truth as such”⁷³

It is especially significant that the testimony of the Spirit is not experienced as some feeling or sensation, as these would be unreliable grounds for the recognition of the Word of God. Surely, the feelings and sensations which readers experience are extremely subjective: changeable over time and determined by mood and temperament etc. Indeed, the sceptic might suggest that believers are likely to have special experiences and heightened reactions to the Bible as the texts are revered in their culture as sacred and they came to them with the expectation of hearing God speak. Much

⁷¹ Frame in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p231

⁷² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol 1, p76 (1.7.2)

⁷³ Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, pp119-120

literature that does not claim inspiration can certainly produce elevated feelings in readers, but this does not lead to the belief that God must be their author. Conversely, believers will sometimes read the words of God without an emotional response, but this should not be thought to indicate that the words are not inspired.

It may be that the believer will not even be conscious of the working of the Spirit in his heart. The Spirit's work in regeneration and conversion may be thought of as the same sort of work: it is a secret work, known by its results. Though the believer's confidence in the Bible as the Word of God depends on (i.e. results from) the work of the Spirit, it could be argued that, it is not for the believer to recognise by some other criteria the Spirit's operation. The believer's certainty that a particular word is a word of God is a direct work of the Spirit. There are some good reasons for his confidence, but he may not be able to give a full defence of it. The believer is not to base his confidence in the word of God on his ability to discern the testimony of the Spirit in his heart to that word. Otherwise, it would be necessary to ask how the internal testimony of the Spirit by and with his word may reliably be recognised. It seems likely that it is known after the fact by its results.

“by and with the word”

It is important to note the Westminster Confession's teaching of the conjunction of the Spirit and the Word, which is an important Biblical theme. For example, the Spirit (or breath) of God and his word are associated in creation (Genesis 1:1-3). The Spirit himself is the author of the Word (e.g. 2 Timothy 3:16) and he enables God's people to receive it. According to the Westminster Confession, the witness of the Spirit is “by and with the word”. Thus, for example, as Franzmann says: “... in the last analysis, the church of God can become convinced and remain assured that they [the twenty-seven books of the New Testament] are indeed [as Athanasius called them] the wellsprings of salvation only by drinking of them.”⁷⁴ The testimony of the Spirit and the self-authenticating power of the Word therefore operate together.

Calvin says: “... by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognise him in his own image, namely, in the Word. So indeed it is. God did not bring forth his Word among men for the sake of a momentary display, intending at the coming of his Spirit to abolish it. Rather, he sent down the same Spirit by whose power he had dispensed the Word, to complete his work by the efficacious confirmation of the Word.”⁷⁵

Many Reformed theologians want to deny that the Spirit gives new revelation to God's people today apart from his written word. For example, Packer says in connection to the testimony of the Spirit: “Now, all the divine utterances which faith apprehends are in fact scriptural affirmations; for there are no words of God spoken to us at all today

⁷⁴ Franzmann, *The Word of The Lord Grows*, p295, quoted in Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, p69

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol 1, p95 (1.9.3)

except the words of Scripture (direct revelation having now ceased)”⁷⁶. John Frame asks: “Does the Spirit tell us what books belong to the canon? ... Not in the sense of whispering in our ear the solutions to these problems! ... Scripture never represents the Spirit’s work as giving us information *about* the Bible. No one, for example, ought to claim that the Spirit has given him a list of canonical books; the actual list comes through historical and theological investigation of the contents of these books. Yet the Spirit has certainly played an important role in the history of the canon. By illuminating and persuading the church concerning the true canonical books, He has helped the church to distinguish between false and true. He has motivated the church to seek out reasons for what He was teaching them in their hearts.”⁷⁷

The relation of the testimony of the Spirit and reason

In the above quotation and elsewhere in his essay, Frame particularly emphasises the rational reasons for accepting the books of the Bible as the canonical words of God, saying that “the actual list [of canonical books] comes through historical and theological investigation of the contents of these books”. On Frame’s view, the Spirit does not give believers new reasons that are not otherwise available for accepting words as words of God. Rather, He overcomes the results of human sin so that believers make reasonable, warranted conclusions on the basis of the data already available, which in their fallenness they would have been inclined to miss.

However, the analysis above has suggested that the present canon cannot be entirely established “through historical and theological investigation of the contents of these books”, as Frame maintains.

As Frame recognises, his emphasis on the reasons for believing that the books of the Evangelical canon are truly canonical is out of step with the apparent sense of some passages in Calvin.

In the following, (and in the proceeding section already quoted above) Calvin sets up at least some sort of contrast between the reasons for believing and the witness of the Spirit: “we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgements or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.... The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reasons.... Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else’s judgement that scripture is from God; but above human judgement we affirm with utter certainty... that it flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgement may lean.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p 119. See also Appendix III, p186f, where Packer clarifies that he means there are no normative words of God outside of the Scriptures today. He does not wish to deny that in a sense revelation continues as the Spirit makes His Word effectually present to believers.

⁷⁷ This comes in the context of discussing Berkouwer’s modifications of the Reformed doctrine of the testimony of the Spirit in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p 228-9

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, volume 1, pp78-80 (1.7.4)

Certainly Calvin and other Reformed theologians would not want to say that belief acceptance of the Evangelical canon is irrational. As Frame rightly points out, Calvin's words should not be taken to imply that reasons and the testimony of the Spirit are in conflict. Indeed, many of the arguments outlined above have suggested it is reasonable to think the current Evangelical canon is accurate. However, it does seem fair to say that the divine authority of every word of the current Evangelical canon cannot be entirely demonstrated by the rational arguments, the historical data currently available or human investigation of its content: alone they are inadequate.

Indeed, consideration has already been given above to the deficiencies of human judgements. Packer emphasises their inadequacy in providing knowledge of God. He argues: "On what grounds should articles of faith be believed? It is not rational demonstration. Truths about God, by their very nature, can be only partly grasped by man, and cannot therefore be demonstrably proved...."⁷⁹.

Further, as Packer says, "Reasoning could at best produce probability; but the nature of faith is to be certain.... Faith, therefore, must rely on something more sure than an inference of probability."⁸⁰

It seems that if the present canon is to be accepted with certainty, it needs to be received by more than rational persuasion, more even than rational persuasion aided to overcome the effects of sin by the Spirit.

Frame thinks that this is problematic as it seems to suggest that the Scriptures lack objective authority apart from the witness of the Spirit⁸¹. However, it might be argued that the words of God that exist would still be properly objectively authoritative, even if it were not possible fully to demonstrate to the satisfaction of all unbelievers that every word was in fact God's. The unbeliever is still bound to believe and obey God on other grounds, for example, by the witness of nature, which he culpably rejects (Romans 1:18-20). The believer, trusting in Christ, being regenerate and receiving the testimony of the Holy Spirit, would be able to and morally obliged to receive God's canonical word as He has given it. As the Westminster Confession concludes, whilst there are factors which move and induce believers to accept the rightly canonical books as God's words, and arguments whereby it evidences itself to be the Word of God, believers' full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in the believers' hearts.

Given the testimony of the Spirit, why do believers disagree?

If God works to authenticate His word to believers, it may be asked why believers occasionally differ as to the extent of the canon. Packer says that this question "does not seem hard to answer.": "Christians fall into mental error, partly through mistaking or overlooking what Scripture teaches, partly through having their minds prepossessed with unbiblical notions so that they cannot take scriptural statements seriously. All

⁷⁹ Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p116

⁸⁰ Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p117

⁸¹ Frame in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p233

heresy begins so.”⁸² The witness of the Spirit, then, does not guarantee that individuals will not make errors of belief. As John Owen recognised, “many who are truly enlightened and sanctified by him [i.e. the Holy Spirit] do yet fall into sundry errors and mistakes, which the differences and divisions among themselves do openly proclaim.”⁸³ When God’s people reject his words they are going against what Packer calls “their own deepest spiritual instincts”.

Packer seems conscious of this occasional disagreement when he cautions elsewhere that: “The Protestant claim, that the Holy Spirit decisively authenticates the canonical Scriptures by causing them to impose themselves on believers as a divine rule for faith and life, should be understood in corporate terms – as meaning that at no time has the great body of the church rejected any book now in the canon, and that divine authority is constantly experienced by the faithful when canonical Scripture is read and preached in the congregation.”⁸⁴ Though the testimony of the Spirit does not confer infallibility to individual believers, then, it does allow the people of God can receive the Word of God with confidence.

The supreme authority?

As the believer’s confidence that a particular Scripture is the Word of God results from the work of God himself, God the Holy Spirit speaking the Scriptures remains the supreme authority. The principle of the supreme authority of the Bible is preserved and God himself remains the ultimate canon for his people.

The New Reformed Epistemology

The question of how the words of God may be known is clearly related to the broader question of how anything may be reliably known.

In questioning the commonly held canon, there are dangers of infinite regress or circularity. As the Word of God is foundational for Evangelical theology, when one asks how its contents can be known, one might then continue with a never ending series of such questions, depending on one’s chosen approach: “How can a book be known to be apostolic?” and “How can the apostles be known to be authoritative?” Or, “How do I know that the Holy Spirit testifies to the canonical status of these words?” and “How do I know that the Holy Spirit’s testimony or my reception of it are reliable?”, and so on.

Aware of such problems in relation to the question of the existence of God, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff have attempted to consider how religious beliefs can be justified, in a collection of essays entitled, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*. They argue that the evidentialist challenge to Christian faith (assuming that all beliefs must be based on demonstrable reasons) depends on discredited classical foundationalism (which searched for secure knowledge from which all other beliefs may be deduced). Their reasons for rejecting foundationalism include that it is

⁸² Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p123 – he also has in mind those who reject the authority of the Bible as a whole

⁸³ quoted in Brown, *The Holy Spirit and the Bible*, p176-177

⁸⁴ Packer in “Scripture” in *IVP Dictionary of Theology*

impossible to derive an adequate set of beliefs from a sufficient secure foundation and the objection that foundationalism is self-defeating as it is unable to justify its key criterion of proper basicity. Frame summarises their argument: “Since, then, classical foundationalism is faulty, the evidentialist objection lacks force. There is no reason why belief in Christianity should not itself be ‘properly basic’, included in the ‘foundation’ of our noetic structure. And if it is, then we are within our rights (epistemically permitted) to believe in Christianity without any evidence or reasons at all.”⁸⁵

Plantinga claims to be following in the tradition of Herman Bavink, Abraham Kuyper and John Calvin. He appeals to Calvin’s notion of the *sensus divinitatus* being natural within man and providing a basis for the properly basic belief that God exists. Thus man may have an immediate response of belief towards God, an invincible conviction, which does not depend on propositional support. Plantinga argues that positive grounds for basic beliefs do exist, as we would generally trust our other sense perceptions: “Then my being appeared to in this characteristic way (together with other circumstances) is what confers on me the right to hold the belief in question; this is what justifies me in accepting it. We could say, if we wish, that this experience is what justifies me in holding it; this is the *ground* of my justification, and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself.”⁸⁶

Though Plantinga and Wolterstorff do not make the suggestion, it could also be argued that the believer’s worldview ought to include the Christian canon as a properly basic foundational belief. Being regenerate, he may be thought to be inclined by his new nature to spontaneously receive the Word of God. As a result of the testimony of the Spirit operating in his heart as he reads the Scriptures, he is indeed appeared to in this way and is epistemically justified in accepting this basic sense perception, although he may not be able to give an exhaustive explanation of his reasons for doing so.

In contrast to what he regards as the discredited foundationalist criterion of rationality, Wolterstorff suggests a positive alternative, that: “A person is rationally justified in believing a certain proposition that he does believe unless he has adequate reason to cease from believing it. Our beliefs are rational unless we have reason for refraining; ... They are innocent until proven guilty, not guilty until proven innocent.”⁸⁷ On the basis of this criterion, the Christian who perceives the present Evangelical canon to be the Word of God would be entitled to continue to hold this view as there is no clear demonstration that any of the books contained in it are not the words of God. Wayne Grudem, for example, defends the status quo, thus: “Today there exists no strong candidates for addition to the canon and no strong objections to any book presently in the canon”⁸⁸

Presuppositionalism

⁸⁵ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p387

⁸⁶ quoted in Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p388

⁸⁷ quoted in Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p 387

⁸⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p66

Whilst sharing some similarities to the so-called “New Reformed Epistemology”, Presuppositionalism⁸⁹ provides further insights to what Christians ought to believe. Whereas Plantinga and Wolterstroff speak primarily of epistemic justification and what Christians have the right to believe, John Frame is more concerned to outline human epistemic obligations and what we ought to believe.

Frame rejects the idea that mankind can come to the Word of God with rational neutrality. Instead, people always begin with ultimate presuppositions, beliefs over which no others take precedence, supremely, a basic commitment of the heart for or against God. Frame writes that: “In the Garden, Eve may have thought that she was playing the role of a “neutral” judge who can choose between God’s word and Satan’s, but in fact her very decision to consider those competing revelations on an equal basis came from her fallen mind. She was not “neutral”; by that time she hated God.”⁹⁰

Rather, the Word of God ought to be presupposed and believed because it is the Word of God, who always speaks truly and has the right to rule. As Frame says: “For a Christian, the content of Scripture must serve as his ultimate presupposition”⁹¹. Frame argues that Scripture justifies itself: “If Scripture is the ultimate justification for all human knowledge, how should we justify our belief in Scripture itself? By Scripture, of course! There is no more ultimate authority, no more reliable source of information, and nothing which is more certain by which Scripture might be tested.”⁹².

Frame recognises that this reasoning is circular and argues that for two reasons there is no alternative to this circularity: “First, allegiance to our Lord demands that we are loyal to him, even when we are seeking to justify our assertions about Him. We cannot abandon our covenant commitment to escape the charge of circularity. Second, no system can avoid circularity, because all systems... - non-Christian as well as Christian – are based on presuppositions that control their epistemologies, argumentation, and use of evidence.”⁹³. When the ultimate criterion of a system is being defended, it must ultimately be defended by itself.

It is important to note that on this view it is the content of Scripture that is presupposed, rather than, for example some concept of “the Word of God”. Particular texts, with the meanings they are intended to convey, must be included if the system is to function effectively. Indeed, the Christian must presuppose the Christian canon as it is the words of God.

Theological Considerations

⁸⁹ see Frame, *Apologetics To The Glory of God*, footnote 16, pp12-13 on the use of the word Presuppositionalism. It goes back to Gordon Clark who rejected evidences and sense perceptions. It is commonly used of Van Till and Frame who did not so emphasise this rejection. For Frame, “Presuppositions” are not temporary or hypothetical but pre-eminent and categorical on the basis of divine revelation.

⁹⁰ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p126

⁹¹ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p45

⁹² Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p129

⁹³ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p130

Several theological considerations make it appropriate to think that God has ensured that his people have the correct canon.

God's plan to provide his people with reliable access to his words seems to be evident from the constitution of the covenant that God has established, as was considered above. That God's people must have reliable access to God's words is required if God has sovereignly determined to rule and save His people effectively by those words, as it was argued above the Bible shows he has.

If God's word in its complete form is thought necessary⁹⁴ for the health of his people, it seems reasonable to conclude that, in his love, God would have provided what is needed in a form that is accessible to his people.

God's omnipotent sovereign power implies that desiring (in his decretive will) to provide his people with reliable access to his word, he would have been able to do so. It follows that he has done so.

These doctrines therefore lead believers to hold that God has exercised providential government over the preservation and recognition of his words by his people.

For example, considering the existence of lost letters of Paul, Calvin expresses confidence that: "... those which the Lord judged to be necessary for his church have been selected by his providence for everlasting remembrance. Let us rest assured, that what is left is enough for us, and that the smallness of the remaining number is not the result of accident; but that the body of Scripture, which is in our possession, has been adjusted by the wonderful counsel of God"⁹⁵.

For Louis Gaussen, a nineteenth-century Reformed theologian, "the marvellous, universal, immovable unanimity with which all the churches of the world for the last fourteen or fifteen centuries continue to present to us one and the same Greek Testament" is to be attributed to the fact that "a concealed but almighty hand has been interposed, and that the Head of the church watches in silence over the new Oracles as he has watched over the old, preserving them from age to age against the folly of men."⁹⁶

As Reymond writes: "... regardless of whether or not the Christian scholar thinks he possesses the one right criterion or the one right list of criteria for a given book's canonicity, at some point – and if at no other point, at least at the point of the established number, namely, twenty-seven New Testament books, not twenty-six or twenty-eight – the Christian must accept by faith that the church, under the providential guidance of God's Spirit, got the number and the list right since God did not provide the church with a specific list of New Testament books. All that we know for certain about

⁹⁴ For further discussion of the doctrine of the necessity of Scripture, see e.g. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Chapter 7, pp116ff

⁹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* p249, quotes by Dunbar, in Carson and Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p344

⁹⁶ Gaussen, *The Canon of the Holy Scriptures Examined in the Light of History*, pp 422, 424, quoted by Dunbar in Carson and Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p344

the history of the first four centuries of the church would suggest that God's Spirit providentially led his church – imperceptively yet inexorably – when it asked its questions, whatever they were, to adopt the twenty-seven documents that the Godhead had determined would serve as the foundation of the church's doctrinal teaching and thus bear infallible witness through the Christian era to the great objective central events of redemption and that *this* “apostolic tradition” *authenticated and established itself* over time in the mind of the church as just this infallible foundation and witness.”⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Reymond, Systematic Theology, p67

CONCLUSIONS

It has been argued that, contrary to some Liberal contentions, the Bible demonstrates that God's ruling of his people by canonical words is central to his purposes.

It has been argued that human judgement alone (particularly if it avoids Evangelical presuppositions) cannot establish the precise content of the Christian canon.

The claims of the Roman Catholic Church that believers ought to accept the canon propagated by the official teaching of the Church, on the basis of Apostolic Tradition, have been rejected as without foundation in Scripture or history.

The Bible has been seen to bear witness to itself. If the Bible's own testimony is accepted, an outline for contents of the canon is established and some of its contents can be secured .

Jesus confirmed the authority of the Hebrew Bible (the present Evangelical Old Testament) and granted the Apostles authority, which enabled them to provide normative teaching for the Church under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The necessary truthfulness and doctrinal harmony of Scripture provide tests by which some words can be seen to be non-canonical and which suggest that other words might be considered as words of God.

The testimony of the church also encourages acceptance of the present canonical books.

These books give indications of their divine origins, such as their marvellous harmony in presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The inner testimony of the Spirit causes God's people to submit to his word with certainty.

Epistemological considerations suggest that believers are justified in believing the Word of God as foundational.

Presuppositionalism argues that the believers ought to base their thinking on the words of God and are bound to accept them as their ultimate commitment.

Evangelical theological considerations make it appropriate for believers to think that God has providentially ensured that his people have reliable access to his canonical words.

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