

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Ad Fontes, Volume Three

Received, Not Chosen: The Canon and the English Bible for the Laity

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CHAPTER ONE

What a Canon Is and Is Not

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

THE STORY YOU HAVE HEARD

You have probably heard some version of it. Sometime in the fourth century, a room full of bishops sat down with a pile of gospels and letters and voted. Usually the room is at Nicaea, and usually the emperor Constantine is looking over their shoulders. The books that served the powerful went in. The books that threatened them were burned, buried, or forgotten. The Bible you hold, the story goes, is the winners’ anthology.

The story is mostly legend, and Chapter 4 will show where it came from. The Council of Nicaea met in 325 to deal with a priest named Arius, who taught that the Son of God was a creature. Its creed and its rulings survive, and none of them says a word about which books belong in the Bible. The tale of Nicaea sorting the books first appears more than five hundred years later.

But the story also comes in a more respectable form, and that form deserves a careful answer. It goes like this: the church produced the canon, so the canon is a church product. A skeptic hears that and concludes the Bible is a human book like any other. A Roman Catholic apologist hears the same thing and concludes something quite different: since the church defined the canon, the church stands above Scripture, because the authority that defines a thing outranks the thing it defines.

Notice that the skeptic and the apologist agree on the main point. Both assume the church made the canon. They only disagree about whether that should make us trust the Bible less or trust the church more.

This chapter begins the case that the main point is wrong. The church did not make the canon. The church received it. That difference, between making and receiving, is the argument of this whole first part of the book.

A MEASURING ROD

Start with the word itself. Canon comes from the Greek word *kanōn*, which first meant a straight reed or rod used for measuring, the way a carpenter uses a straightedge. From there it came to mean a rule or standard, the thing you measure other things against.

Paul uses the word that way. After a whole letter defending the gospel of grace against teachers who wanted Gentile Christians circumcised, he writes:

“And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” (Galatians 6:16)

The “rule” there is *kanōn*. It is not a list of anything. It is a standard to walk by: the new creation in Christ that Paul has just described.

The early church kept using the word in that sense. By the late second century, Irenaeus of Lyons speaks of the “rule of truth” that a Christian receives at Baptism (Against Heresies 1.9.4). Tertullian and others call it the “rule of faith.” They meant the basic shape of the apostolic teaching, the same shape you know from the Apostles’ Creed: one God the Father, who made all things; his Son Jesus Christ, born, crucified, risen; the Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets. That rule was the measuring rod against which any teaching could be checked.

Only later did canon come to mean a list of books. When Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote his Easter letter for the year 367, he used the word for the books “included in the Canon” and set them apart from other books that were useful to read but were not part of it (Festal Letter 39). Even there, notice the order. The books were not authoritative because they were on the list. They were on the list because they were the authoritative writings, the ones the churches already measured everything else against.

So the word carries both meanings, and the order matters. First a rule, then a list. First a standard that norms, then a table of contents that names where the standard is found. If you remember only one thing from this chapter, remember that. A canon is a rule before it is a list.

GETTING THE RELATIONSHIP BACKWARD

Once you see that, the respectable form of the story starts to come apart. It assumes that whoever writes the list must be the source of the list’s authority. But that does not fol-

low, and you already know it does not follow, because you deal with this distinction every day.

A county clerk who records your birth does not cause you to be born. A jeweler who tests a ring and declares it gold does not make it gold. A dictionary that lists a word did not invent the word; it recorded how people were already speaking. In each case the one who writes something down is bearing witness to something that was already true. The witness can be important, even necessary, without being the source.

That is the relationship between the church and its Scriptures. Jesus gives us the picture:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27)

The flock does not authorize the Shepherd’s voice. The flock recognizes it. When the churches of the fourth century finally wrote down which books they read as Scripture, they were like sheep saying out loud, at last, which voice they had been following all along.

Roman Catholic writers like to quote a line from Augustine, who said he would not have believed the gospel had the authority of the catholic church not moved him (Against the Letter of Mani Called “The Foundation” 5.6). There is a true sense in which that is so, and the Gospel of John shows it. After Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, she went back to her town and told everyone about him. Many came because of her word. Then they heard Jesus for themselves:

“They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world.’” (John 4:42)

The church is that woman. Her witness brings people to the Word, and without her many would never have come. But once they hear the Word, their faith rests on the Word, not on her. She pointed. She did not create the one she pointed to, and she did not stand above him.

WHAT THE CHURCH ACTUALLY DOES

If the church does not create Scripture, what does it do? The New Testament uses a cluster of words for it, and all of them describe receiving and handing on.

The church receives. Paul thanks God that the Thessalonians “received the word of God” and accepted it “not as the word of men but as what it really is” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). They did not decide that Paul’s preaching was God’s Word. They recognized that it already was.

The church is entrusted. Paul says that the great advantage of the Jews was that “the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2). A person entrusted with something is a steward, not an owner. Israel kept the Scriptures; Israel did not write itself a Bible.

The church guards and holds up. Paul calls the church “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). A pillar holds something up so it can be seen. It does not make what it holds. In the ancient world a public notice was often posted on a pillar so the whole town could read it. That is the church’s work with the Scriptures: to keep them standing where everyone can read them.

The church hands on. Jude urges his readers “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Once for all. The faith is not still being delivered, revised, and expanded by later authorities. It was delivered, and the church’s task is to contend for what it was given.

Notice what none of these words says. None says the church authorizes, ratifies, or confers. The church’s role is real and honorable, but it is the role of a receiver and a steward. That is why, when a council wrote a list, it could only ever be a confession: “These are the books we have received.”

WHY THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS CONTAIN NO LIST

This leads to a fact that surprises many Lutherans. Open the Book of Concord, the collection of confessions every Lutheran pastor vows to teach, and look for the list of canonical books. You will not find one. The Lutheran church has never adopted an official, numbered list of the books of the Bible.

That is not an oversight, and it does not mean the canon is up for grabs. It is a deliberate confession about where authority lies. The Formula of Concord opens this way:

“We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone.” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm 1)

Look at the words rule and prophetic and apostolic. The Formula does not say “the books approved by a council.” It says the writings of the prophets and apostles. That is exactly the question the early churches were asking when they tested a book: did it come to us from the prophets and apostles, on whose foundation the church is built (Ephesians 2:20)? The Confessions point to the same standard the early church used. They do not put a later decree on top of it.

Luther put the principle bluntly in the Smalcald Articles: the Word of God, “and no one else, not even an angel,” should establish articles of faith (Smalcald Articles II.ii.15). If even an angel cannot add an article of faith, neither can a council, a pope, or a synod. And if no one can add to the Word’s authority, no one is needed to grant it, either.

Lutheran teachers later summed this up with a pair of Latin phrases. Scripture is the *norma normans*, the “norming norm,” the rule that measures everything else. The creeds and confessions are the *norma normata*, the “normed norm,” rules that are themselves measured by Scripture and hold authority only because they agree with it. The Formula says as much: the creeds and other writings “are not judges, as is Holy Scripture, but they are only witnesses and explanations of the faith” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm 8).

The Roman church took a different path. At the Council of Trent, on 8 April 1546, it issued a decree listing the books of the Bible and pronouncing a curse on anyone who did not receive them all, “entire with all their parts,” as they stood in the Latin Vulgate. Chapter 4 will look at that decree closely and fairly. For now, notice the difference in kind. Trent made the list itself an article of faith, guaranteed by the council’s authority. The Lutheran Confessions made Scripture the guarantee and left the council beneath it.

WHAT “RECEIVED” DOES NOT MEAN

It would be easy to hear all this and draw the wrong conclusions, so it is worth naming four of them.

It does not mean the church played no part. The church’s witness was real and necessary. Congregations kept the letters they received, copied them, read them in worship,

and passed them along. Bishops compared notes. Historians like Eusebius recorded what the churches said. God used all of it. Receiving is something the church does, and it takes work.

It does not mean each Christian picks his own Bible. “The church did not choose” does not mean “so I may.” The canon was recognized by the churches together, across regions and centuries, not by individuals deciding what they found inspiring. A private canon is still a chosen canon. It simply moves the choosing from a council to an armchair.

It does not mean the process was quick or tidy. Some books were received everywhere from the beginning. Others were doubted in some regions for a long time. Hebrews was questioned in the West, and Revelation in parts of the East. Luther wrote frank prefaces to four New Testament books. Chapter 5 tells that story in full. The doubts are part of the record, and the Lutheran church has never been afraid of the record.

It does not mean there is no difference between the books in the canon and other good books. The early church read many edifying writings. Athanasius himself recommended some of them for new converts. But being edifying is not the test. A sermon can be edifying. The question was always whether a writing came from the prophets and apostles. That is why Lutherans can print the Apocrypha in their Bibles, read it with profit, and still refuse to build a single article of faith on it. Chapter 6 explains how.

THE VOICE THAT WAS ALREADY SPEAKING

The Thessalonians did not hold a meeting to decide whether Paul’s preaching was the Word of God. They heard it, and it did what only the Word of God does: it went to work in them. Paul says it “is at work in you believers” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). That is how the canon came to be recognized. The churches heard these writings read aloud week after week, and the Spirit did through them what the Spirit does through no other book. The lists came later, written by people who were describing what had already been happening for a long time.

The rest of Part One follows that process. Chapter 2 looks at the Bible Jesus read, the Scriptures of Israel he received and handed on to his apostles. Chapter 3 follows the apostolic writings from the churches that first received them to the lists of the fourth century. Chapter 4 separates what Nicaea did from what Trent did. Chapter 5 tells the honest story of the disputed books, and Chapter 6 explains the Apocrypha.

Through all of it, keep the measuring rod in mind. The canon is a rule before it is a list. The church did not make the rule. It was measured by it.

TERMS IN THIS CHAPTER

Canon. From the Greek *kanōn*, “measuring rod.” First a rule or standard; later, the list of books that are that standard.

Rule of faith. The basic outline of apostolic teaching, received at Baptism and summarized in the creeds; the early church’s standard for testing teaching.

Receive. The church’s act of recognizing and accepting what God has already given, as opposed to creating or authorizing it.

Norming norm (*norma normans*). Scripture, the rule that measures every other teaching.

Normed norm (*norma normata*). The creeds and confessions, which have authority because and insofar as they agree with Scripture.

Book of Concord. The 1580 collection of the Lutheran Confessions, including the Augsburg Confession, the Small and Large Catechisms, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you have answered the question “Who decided which books are in the Bible?” Where did that answer come from?
2. The skeptic and the Roman Catholic apologist both assume the church made the canon. Why does that shared assumption matter more than their disagreement?
3. Think of other examples, like the county clerk or the jeweler, where someone bears witness to something without creating it. How do they help explain the church’s relationship to Scripture?
4. Read John 4:39 to 42. What changes for the Samaritans between verse 39 and verse 42? What does that suggest about the church’s role in bringing people to the Word?
5. Why might it be a strength, not a weakness, that the Lutheran Confessions contain no list of books?
6. Which of the four misunderstandings in “What ‘received’ does not mean” have you heard most often? How would you answer it in a sentence or two?

*This is where the sample ends. The rest of Ad Fontes, Volume Three
is the invitation it opens onto.*

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