

Marxsen sometimes seems to reason that, for the ancient church that canonized the New Testament writings, "canon" originally had the meaning, simply, of "list," "inventory," "index." What was "canon" for *that* church in the further sense of "standard," "norm," "rule," or "authority" was neither this list of writings nor any of the writings on the list, but rather the original and originating and therefore constitutive witness of the apostles—according to the principle, canonical = apostolic. Only after the church had determined, by howsoever questionable procedures, that a given writing was apostolic did it become "canonical" in the sense that it was placed on the "list"; and only then did it itself, together with the other writings on the list, become "canonical" in the further sense of "authoritative."

If Marxsen's reasoning is sound, then one can quite reasonably argue that, from the very outset of the process of canonization, and thus for the ancient church, the canon of scripture, or of the New Testament, was never the primary (formal) authority. Right from the beginning, the only primary (formal) authority for the church has been the apostolic witness.

This argument can be supported by the so-called Muratorian canon, from which it is clear that writings could be accepted into the canon in the sense of being placed on the list only if they were rightly judged to be apostolic (or prophetic) writings determined for the entire "catholic church" and thus deserving of being publicly read in the church's services of worship. Public reading of writings presupposed their authority. But primary authority belonged only with the original and originating and therefore constitutive witness of the apostles.

But even if the Muratorian canon removes any doubt that the apostolicity of a writing was the principle for determining whether it was binding on the church, Marxsen rightly warns that we must not misunderstand this in a modern sense as though properly "historical" judgments of apostolic authorship decided whether a writing belonged on the list of authoritative writings. In point of fact, there was simply no available instrumentarium for reaching such judgments. Substantial agreement with a judge's own (unquestionably!) "apostolic" tradition, or long use in the

church, including being publicly read in its services, typically sufficed to reach the judgment of apostolic authorship.

At the same time, recognizing this explains why, so far as the ancient church was concerned, apostolicity was *the* (one and only) principle of canonicity and not, as some scholars have mistakenly supposed, simply one such principle among others, such as substantial agreement with the judge's own "apostolic" tradition or long and extensive use in the church. Rightly understood, these other desiderata were really only ways of determining apostolicity, instead of yet other principles of canonicity alongside it.

Another important point that Marxsen rightly calls attention to is that the delimiting of the New Testament canon (= list) was doubly accidental. It was accidental, in the first place, because the only writings that could even be considered for placement on the list were such writings as had, in fact, been preserved; and whether or not a particular writing was preserved was a matter of historical accident. But the delimiting of the canon was accidental, in the second place, because judgments about the "apostolicity" of writings were made on the basis of the insights and oversights of a particular historical time and place. The supposedly authoritative decisions that were reached were, at best, only "interim solutions."

Because, as the Reformers taught us, "even popes and councils can err," all of these decisions, including the decision of Athanasius, are in principle revisable—as much so, indeed, as any of the decisions following them. But, again, Marxsen is exactly right in stressing that little is gained by merely superficial criticism of the scope of the canon. Of course, there is no question that the ancient church was profoundly concerned with the apostolicity of writings and, to that extent, with the question of their authorship. Consequently, if it could have been as certain as scholars can be today that Hebrews was not written by Paul or 2 Peter, by Peter, it would not have accepted these writings into its canon. Still, criticism simply of the scope of the canon is superficial.

A deeper criticism becomes possible as soon as one asks why the ancient church so unhesitatingly made apostolicity the criterion of canonicity.

It did so, beyond any question, because, in face of heresis² and alleged later revelations, it wanted to remain oriented, first and last, to the decisive historical moment of its own creation as a community in the once-for-all revelation of God through Jesus Christ. This revelation, like any other "special" revelation in history, was not only a revelation *of* something or someone *through* something or someone, but also a revelation *to* someone. And those to whom it was a revelation belonged to it in a unique way—namely, as its original and originating witnesses who, as such, were the constitutive members of the community and to whom alone the term "apostles" strictly and properly refers. Consequently, for all other members of the community, to belong to it means and must mean to believe *in* God *through* Jesus Christ *with* the apostles—in communion with *their* witness of faith. The ancient church, in its way, recognized precisely this in making apostolicity *the* principle of canonicity. But to follow the ancient church in recognizing this is to have the basis for a more profound criticism of its judgments in canonizing the New Testament writings. It is to recognize that the sole primary authority for the Christian community is no more "scripture alone" than it is "scripture and tradition," but is solely the witness of the apostles to which scripture (= early tradition) no less than tradition (= later tradition) always remains subject.

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