

According to Lee M. McDonald, in a paper presented to the Jesus Seminar in October 1997 ("The Origins of the New Testament Scripture Canon"), "the first Christian canon" was Jesus himself. "Long before there was an authoritative biblical canon in the Church, Jesus was the final authority for the earliest community of Christians. His life, death, and resurrection, as well as his teachings, functioned as the absolute or final canon for the early believers." McDonald also argues in the same paper that there were four criteria used to determine the contents of the New Testament canon—namely, (1) *apostolicity*; (2) *orthodoxy*; (3) *antiquity*; and (4) *use*. (He also considers "inspiration" as a fifth possible criterion, only to conclude that it "does not appear to have played a major role in the decision making process for any of the early churches so much as serving as a basic assumption or corollary. . . . [A] study of the early Christian writings through the fifth century shows that generally speaking whatever was believed to be true and faithful was also believed to be inspired of God.")

McDonald's arguments for both points, however, suffer from his failing to make—in fact, showing not the least awareness of—certain crucial relevant distinctions.

That Jesus himself may indeed be said to have been *the* (primal) *source of authority* for the earliest Christian community in no way warrants claiming, as McDonald does, that he was *an authority* for them, even if "the final authority." Why not? Because as true as it is that any authority as such is and must be also a source of authority, the converse—that any source of authority is and must be also an authority—is not true.

As for his other argument, McDonald fails to rule out the counterargument that, while there was, in point of fact, only one *criterion* of canonicity—namely, his first criterion of apostolicity—there were several *desiderata* relevant to determining apostolicity and, in turn, canonicity, among which desiderata, arguably, other so-called criteria such as "orthodoxy," "antiquity," and "use" all played a role. (One might develop the same counterargument by distinguishing between the one *criterion* of apostolicity and several *specific requirements* of this criterion such as orthodoxy, antiquity, and use.)

Could there be better evidence than this that sound arguments for properly *historical* conclusions necessarily depend upon consistently making certain properly *philosophical* distinctions?!

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Addendum to ¶ 3—to be added after “is not true”:

Moreover, what really did function as “the final authority” for the earliest Christian community was evidently, not Jesus himself, but rather the apostolic kerygma or proclamation of Jesus’ decisive significance, together with the teaching necessarily implied by it. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain how “apostolicity” eventually became *the* (or even *a*) criterion of canonicity.