

There is no doubt that not a single NT author thought of writing a work that would eventually be included in the canon. Paul couldn't even begin to think of such a thing, since he did not reckon with the church's continuing beyond his own generation. And in the second and third generations of NT authors, their only concern was so to rewrite the old proclamations that they could reach human beings in the new situation.

But, naturally, there was already a church throughout this entire time. Therefore, it is not the case, as we might think, that the church lived "out of scripture." Of course, the OT played a role in certain circles. (To be sure, it arose as OT only at the end of the first century of the Christian era. Here, too, there were up to that point only individual writings, some of which, from late Jewish apocalypticism, were highly regarded, even though they were not subsequently included in the OT canon.) But in Christian communities one did not simply interpret the OT; one understood it anew from the standpoint of faith in Christ. Therefore, until well into the second century the church did not live out of scripture (for the simple reason that there was no scripture for it to live out of).

But in the course of the some 80 years between 50 and 130 A.D. there arose in this early church the writings that were later to form the NT. Just how the collection took place we are no longer able to follow in all its details, even if we can get a sufficiently clear picture of the overall development.

Very early on letters of Paul were collected. This we know from 2 Pet 3:15; and we can be sure of it from the canon of Marcion, which included ten Pauline letters in addition to a "purified" Gospel of Luke. Although the church generally did not take over Marcion's canon, the latter did force it to make a decision about what writings were to be normative for it. But for a long time there was no agreement about this. A whole bunch of writings were controversial in the

6/6/2

individual church provinces. Many that are now in the canon were rejected (so, e.g., Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, James, and Revelation), while others that did not get accepted later into the canon enjoyed high regard. The history of these struggles over the canon (and one really must speak of struggles) is very complicated and, as was said before, cannot any longer be fully reconstructed.

More important, however, than the question about the details of this history is the question about the principles that were applied to determine which of the large number of early Christian writings that had emerged in the meantime were to be accepted in the canon. But here we are pretty well informed. Only those writings were to be canonical that were apostolic, i.e., that either went back directly to the apostles themselves or could at least be traced to immediate disciples of the apostles. The end of the apostolic age was thus supposed to be the limit.

There was nothing arbitrary about this supposition, for what was expressed by this decision was that the church still wanted to hold fast to its beginning—and that means to Jesus. Even if the proclamation was later to go further; and even if it was thereby to assume different forms, the one thing to be avoided was that the tradition that emerged would depart from its beginning. If we say to someone under our pastoral care today, "What Jesus requires of you is this or that," what we say may well sound different from what would have been said a generation ago. But under no circumstances may such counsel simply set forth our own ideas as Jesus' requirement, but we must have assurance that the later counsel has support in what God said to human beings in and through Jesus. In order, then, not to be at the mercy of every possible tradition, it became necessary in time to collect the apostolic tradition, since it had the greatest proximity to Jesus.

Despite agreement in principle, however, there was no agreement about just what was to be regarded as apostolic proclamation. In many cases, it turned out that one found in a certain writing the view held in one's own province of the church. Believing, then, that one's province stood in the correct apostolic tradition, one inferred that the writing in question was also apostolic and, therefore, had to be old. But this, of course, was an impossible procedure and was accordingly decisively rejected by those in other church provinces.

Yet another thing made a clear decision difficult. At that time, it was customary and by no means unusual to publish writings under another's name. A disciple, for instance, could issue at least his first work under the name of his teacher and thus intend in this way to do honor to the teacher. Therefore, while pseudonymity could indeed involve deception in certain cases, in general it occurred in good faith. The writer really believed that if Paul or Peter or another apostle were yet alive, he would say to the church exactly what the writer was now formulating in his letter or other writing. And then he used the apostolic name in order to acquire for his writing the requisite importance. Because this procedure was well known, however, a decision about real apostolic authorship was exceedingly difficult with the means of criticism then and there available.

In the back and forth of controversy over delimiting the canon, a more or less authoritative stipulation was supposed to carry the day. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, in his 39th Easter Letter in 367 A.D., established the twenty-seven books still in our NT today as canonical. But even with this a definitive decision was not made, since even later there were still many departures from Athanasius's list. In time, however, it tended to prevail.

What are we to think of this process of canonization? There are two considerations of principle that are relevant:

(1) In the Protestant church there can be no definitive episcopal decision, since, as Luther formulated it, even popes and councils can err. But this means, then, that the question of the limits of the canon is not definitively answered by the stipulation of Athanasius. As for the argument that the Holy Spirit was involved in delimiting the canon, one need not dispute this claim in order to insist that it be validated, which one may very well doubt it is likely to be. Either one presupposes that all ecclesial decisions are always informed by the Spirit and, for this reason, are infallible, or else one must allow the possibility that even in the church there are fallible decisions. To say that the church still acted infallibly in stipulating the canon, but has been fallible ever since is sheer arbitrariness.

(2) In the process of canonization, historical judgments (of the authorship of writings) were made by authoritative decisions. But authoritative decisions cannot settle what can be decided only by historical investigation.

But should writings now known not to be apostolic be removed from the canon? By no means. Pseudonymity does not mean falsification. And even if Paul, for instance, did not write Colossians and Ephesians, one may still say that their author(s), living in the generation after Paul, understood him well enough to have a certain right to presume that, if he were yet alive, he would himself have so written in face of the same set of problems.

But something else is more important. The interest in canonization, or in delimiting the canon, did not begin with Jesus in order then to isolate a number of writings that had a special quality no longer possessed by the writings coming after them. Rather, the interest went in precisely the converse direction: out of the existing writings and through them one wanted to refer to the witnesses that were closest to Jesus. One wanted to sort out the apostolic writings, not because

the apostles had such a high quality, but because they had the greatest proximity to Jesus.

The reason, therefore, that from all of the writings one sorted out precisely these and brought them together in the NT was that the church in a later time wanted always to be reminded and itself always to hold fast that Jesus is the decisive and definitive, and, therefore, the finally valid word of God to human beings.

Whether one writing more or less stands in the NT is no longer important. But what always remains important is the question of whether and how these writings transmit the word of God, Jesus. This must be attended to so that Jesus the word of God, through the word of God in the NT to persons of that time, can also be spoken to us as the word of God.

It is Jesus that modern theology seeks to serve.

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