

Old and New Testaments—closed? The answer is a resounding yes. The closing of the Old Testament canon probably occurred at least a century before the birth of Jesus, and the closing of the New took place in the late fourth century. No longer are we in a position to reassess the second-century process, undertaken by godly believers who were intimates of the apostles themselves. Their work ultimately resulted in what we believe to have been the divinely superintended choice of the books of the Jewish and Christian canons that constitute our Bible. The

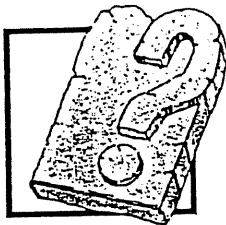
closing of the two canons and their amalgamation into one are historical watersheds that it would be presumptuous to disturb.

"All Scripture"—neither more nor less than what we have—"is God-breathed and is [therefore] useful" (2 Tim. 3:16). The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, constitutes the total Canon for the church universal. ■

Ronald Youngblood is professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Bethel Seminary West (San Diego, Calif.), translator-editor of the New International Version of the Bible, and associate editor of the NIV Study Bible.

The New Testament: How Do We Know for Sure?

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.



History shows that the church has not been able to establish the criteria for proving a book belongs in the Bible.

Why does the church accept the 27 books of the New Testament as canon? How do we know there is not some document that may some day be discovered and deserve to be included? Alternatively, how do we know that something has not slipped in that does not really belong?

These questions take on a pressing, even distressing, character when posed in light of the actual development of the Canon in the early church. It was a slow process covering roughly 300 years before the Canon accepted in the church was the same as our 27-book canon. Athanasius's so-called Easter Letter of 367 is apparently the first official, ecclesiastical decision to that effect. And there were significant differences at earlier stages even among orthodox figures. Why, for instance, did the Shepherd of Hermas, despite initial support, eventually go by the board, while 2 Peter, at first subject to much uncertainty, ultimately found a secure place in the Canon?

All told, how do we know that in accepting the present New Testament, and the authority that goes with it, we are not simply following well-intentioned but nonetheless fallible decisions of people like ourselves?

Criteria of canonicity?

It may seem that the solution to this problem lies in establishing certain criteria for determining whether or not a particular book is canonical. However, as promising as this approach is at first glance, it is not viable. History shows that, in fact, the church has not yet been able to establish the criteria (set of criteria) required—not only a necessary, but a *sufficient* condition.

Apostolic authority. The most frequently cited criterion for canonicity has been apostolic authorship. That is, if an apostle wrote the document in question, it should be included in the Canon. But the difficulties for apostolic authorship or origin as a criterion are apparent.

For example, Mark, Luke-Acts, Hebrews, Jude, and most likely James were not written by apostles. Some scholars have countered this objection by expanding the notion of apostolicity to include those who were *close* to the circle of apostles. Thus, what they wrote was associated with the authority of a particular apostle. Obviously, such an expansion fatally weakens apostolicity as a criterion of canonicity.

An even greater difficulty is posed by the references to Paul's "previous" letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9) and his letter to the church at Laodicea (Col. 4:16). Note as well a possible allusion to previously written communication in Philippians 3:1. These documents, written by an apostle and evidently on par in authority with Paul's other canonical letters, are not in the New Testament.

Antiquity. Another proposed criterion has to do with the age of a literary composition—only the earliest documents have been included in the Canon. This is really a variation on apostolicity, and it founders on the same difficulties: the "previous" letter of 1 Corinthians 5:9 is earlier, say, than Hebrews.

Public lection. Some have suggested that only those documents first read aloud and used in public worship are canonical. This, too, encounters difficulty in that documents such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache were used in public worship in the early stages of the church, while no evidence exists for similar use

of 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, or Jude.

Inspiration. Though necessary to canonicity, inspiration does not coincide with it. Paul's previous letter to the Corinthians and his letter to the Laodiceans carry full apostolic authority and are therefore presumably inspired. Without unduly multiplying nonextant documents, those letters suggest that Paul, along with at least some of the other apostles, produced a somewhat larger volume of inspired material (exactly how much is difficult to say) than has subsequently been included in the Canon.

It seems clear, then, that the church has failed to establish criteria of canonicity. Even more telling, however, is the recognition that in principle all attempts to demonstrate such criteria must fail and ultimately threaten to undermine the canonicity of Scripture. For example, suppose we take *x* (say, apostolicity) to be a criterion of canonicity. That would mean entering into a historical investigation to identify and circumscribe *x*. But such a procedure could only mean subjecting the Canon to the relativity of historical study and our fallible human insight. That is, it would destroy the New Testament as canon, as absolute authority. In the final analysis, the attempt to demonstrate criteria of canonicity seeks, from a position above the Canon, to rationalize or generalize about the Canon as a unique, particular historical state of affairs.

Instead, we must recognize the New Testament canon as a self-establishing, self-validating entity. Canonicity is a unique concept. It neither coincides with what is apostolic nor even with what is inspired. Rather, canonical is what belongs to the New Testament, and what belongs to the New Testament is canonical.

God is Canon

We ought not, then, look for an Archimedean point outside the New Testament canon. Yet, in another respect, the Canon does point back beyond itself—to God, its origin and author.

The collection of New Testament documents is not a historical phenomenon to be explained in terms of purely immanent factors—contingent factors, in turn, without an ultimate explanation. The New Testament is not a collection that "just happened." Rather, it is that historical phenomenon by which God, the sovereign Architect and Lord of history, asserts and maintains himself as Canon.

With these observations we have a provisional answer to the question of an open or closed canon. In the sense that God is the Author of the whole as well as each of the constituent parts, the New Testament canon is closed or complete.

This conclusion involves an important distinction. The origin of the New Testament canon is not the same as its reception by the church. We must avoid confusing the existence of the Canon with its recognition—what is constitutive (God's

action) with what is reflexive (the church's action). The activity of the church—statements of church fathers, decrees of councils, and so on, concerning the contents of the New Testament—does not create the Canon.

Such a position, sometimes called the *a priori* of faith, does not mean Scripture was dropped straight down from heaven. The New Testament canon is bound up with the giving of revelation in history. Without on the one hand abandoning our *a priori*, or on the other allowing redemptive history to function as a criterion of canonicity in a strict sense, we need to reflect further on that *a priori* of faith in the light of Scripture. A good place to start is with the whole concept of apostolicity.

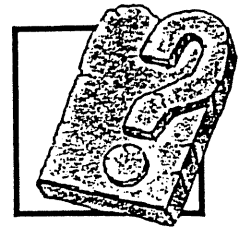
Apostles: Christ's representatives

The Greek noun *apostolos*, related to the more common verb *apostellō* (to send, send out), refers in general to a messenger or, more formally, to an envoy or delegate. Traditionally, the New Testament apostle has been understood primarily as a religious figure like a missionary, someone sent to communicate the gospel.

More recently, however, studies in the background of the New Testament have shed new light on the figure of the apostle. In the Judaism contemporary to the writing of the New Testament, the *shāliah* (from the Hebrew *shāliah*: to send) had a significance that was legal, not religious. The *shāliah* was someone authorized to execute a task in the interests of another person or group. He was an authorized, authoritative representative, akin to our power of attorney. Further, the *shāliah* was identified in a full way with the one who commissioned him; in some instances he was free to take initiatives in discharging his commission. This full authority is reflected in the Talmudic formula that "a man's *shāliah* is the same as himself."

Something of this background is reflected in the figure of the apostle in the New Testament. In John 13:12ff., the issue of authority is prominent (the point, paradoxically, is the authority to serve others, exemplified in Jesus' washing the disciples' feet). The focus of verse 16 is the derivative nature of the apostles' authority—"no servant is greater than his master, nor is an *apostolos* greater than the one who sent him." Verse 20 not only expresses this point of derivation but accents the identification of the sender and the one sent: "Whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me."

At issue, then, is the uniqueness and fullness of apostolic authority. The apostles encountered in the New Testament, with the few exceptions noted in the next paragraph, are "apostles of Christ." As such they are authorized representatives of Christ, deputized personal exemplifications of his authority. Note, for instance, Galatians



Canonicity is a unique concept. It neither coincides with what is apostolic, nor even with what is inspired.

4:14 where Paul says of himself as an angel-apostle (cf. 1:1-2:10) that the Galatians received him "as if I were Jesus Christ himself."

A certain elasticity does attach to the New Testament usage of *apostolos*. 2 Corinthians 8:23 and Philippians 2:23 (perhaps, too, Acts 14:4, 14) refer in a looser, most likely temporary, ad hoc sense to messengers or representatives sent by a local church for a specific task ("apostles of the churches," 2 Cor. 8:23). This is in distinction from the apostles of Christ in the strict sense, who are "first" in the (one, universal) church (1 Cor. 12:28; cf. Eph. 4:11). In which sense the reference in Romans 16:7 is to be taken is difficult to say.

Apostles: Witness to the Resurrection

As Christ's representatives, the apostles are the church's foundation (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20). But how are they that foundation? The single most-important function of the apostles is their witness bearing (*marturia*). The focus of apostolic witness, especially in Acts, is Christ's resurrection, not as an isolated event but in the context of his whole work, especially his death and as the consummation of redemptive history. The apostles testify to the already accomplished redemptive basis of the church. That testimony, specifically, makes the apostles the foundation of the church.

This binding, *shāliyah*-like character of the apostles' witness is seen in the equation of apostolic proclamation with the Word of God. Paul, for instance, says of the Thessalonians that they received his preaching "not as the word of men, but for what it actually is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). Most likely, 1 Corinthians 11:23 ("For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you") points to the exalted Lord himself as the author-bearer of apostolic tradition. According to Galatians 1:12, Paul's gospel is revelation received directly from Christ; yet, verse 18 intimates, that revelation correlates with the tradition he received through contact with the other apostles, an equation that exists because, ultimately, both come from the exalted Christ.

Apostolic witness, then, is not merely personal testimony. Instead, it is an infallibly authoritative, legally binding deposition, the kind that stands up in court. That witness embodies a canonical principle: it provides the matrix for a new canon, the emergence of a new body of revelation to stand alongside the Old Testament.

Apostles: The canonical dimension

Plainly, as the apostles die and pass out of the picture, the need is for the preservation of apostolic witness in and by the church. In fact, the New Testament itself gives indications of an apostolic concern for such preservation.

Already at the time of the apostles their wit-

ness is called "tradition" (*paradosis*). Its authoritative, binding character is seen in the fact that Paul, for instance, commands his readers to "hold firmly" to it (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 3:6). 2 Thessalonians 2:15 is especially instructive in referring to those traditions passed on "whether by word of mouth or by letter." Notice that here, shortly after 1 Thessalonians—perhaps the earliest New Testament document—written, as well as oral, apostolic tradition is already in view as authoritative.

The New Testament itself, then, anticipated and initiated a trend. As the apostles died off and their foundational witness was completed, written apostolic witness became increasingly crucial and focal, until it exclusively was the foundational Word of God (along with the Old Testament) on which the church was being built.

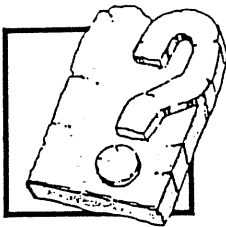
This trend corresponds, as just noted, to the intention of Paul. And broadly considered, developments in the church concerning the Canon during the second through fourth centuries complement that apostolic intention. Those developments involve the increasing awareness in the early church of its distance from the apostolic past, and so the increasing awareness of the foundational, revelatory nature of inscripturated apostolic witness. The complement to the apostolic intention, in other words, is postapostolic recognition of the New Testament canon. Further, this process of recognition, answering to an apostolic intention, is the intention of Christ. No one less than the exalted Christ himself is the architect of the process.

Notice, however, how little this undeniable and substantial connection between the apostles and the Canon provides a criterion of canonicity even in a looser sense. Most of the New Testament documents with nonapostolic authors do display, either on internal grounds or by reliable tradition, a direct tie to one or another of the apostles. But that is not so clearly the case for Jude and not at all for Hebrews. (For that matter in Hebrews 2:3, the author seems to separate himself from the apostolic circle while emphatically affirming apostolic tradition.)

The Canon and revelation

This foundational witness of the apostles to the work of Christ brings to light an important characteristic of all verbal revelation: the correlation between redemptive act and revelatory word. God's word is given to attest and interpret his saving work. This correlation holds true throughout the entire history of redemption, beginning in the Garden of Eden and reaching its climax in the death, exaltation, and return of Christ. Accordingly, the ongoing history of revelation is a strand within redemptive history as a whole; the process of verbal revelation conforms to the contours of that larger history.

Further, the history of redemption has an epoci-



As the apostles died off and their foundational witness was completed, written apostolic witness became increasingly crucial.

al character. It moves forward in decisive steps, not in a uniform, smoothly evolutionary fashion. Consequently, high points in redemptive history are accompanied by copious outpourings of verbal revelation. Old Covenant revelation, for instance, tends to cluster around critical junctures like the Exodus, key events in the monarchy, the exile, and return of the remnant.

The negative side of this correlation bears particularly on the issue of the Canon and its closing. Times of inactivity in the history of redemption are, correlatively, times of silence in the history of revelation. The rebuilding of the temple and the return of the remnant from exile are the last critical developments before the coming of Christ. After that period there was a pause; redemptive history now stands still until the final surge forward at Christ's coming.

Similarly, after the exaltation of Christ and the founding of the church, there was a pause or delay in the epochal forward movement of redemptive history. Only one event in that history remains: the return of Christ. Accordingly, following the contemporaneous outpouring of revelation focused on the first coming of Christ, the history of revelation lapses into silence. Confirming that silence is the disappearance of the apostolate, that prophetic institution established by Christ specifically to provide revelatory attestation and interpretation of the redemption consummated in his person and work.

To say that redemptive history is "on hold" until Christ's return is not to deny the full reality and redemptive significance of what is happening in the church today. Church history, however, is not an extension of redemption, but the reflex of that work, the ongoing application of its benefits. It is not part of the foundation of the church, but the building being erected on the finished, once-for-all redemptive foundation laid by Christ.

As far as the church today is concerned, then, the history of revelation is closed until Christ's return. The expectation of new revelation, in whatever form, runs counter to the witness of Scripture itself. At issue here is the correlation between redemptive act (in the sense of once-for-all accomplishment) and word revelation. Where the former is lacking, there is no place for the latter. The completion or cessation of revelation is a function of the finished work of Christ (cf. Heb. 1:2).

Recognizing the redemptive-historical character of revelation is crucial to a proper view of the Canon. Revelation does not consist of divinely given information and directives just for me. The impact of revelation on the believer ought to be intimate and personal, but it is not individualistic. In its virtually limitless applications to the circumstances of individual believers of whatever time and place, revelation has a corporate, covenantal character. It is for the one peo-

Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea

Eusebius (280–340) was the kind of man who liked to make lists. The first important list this learned bureaucrat drew up was a table of the paragraphs of the New Testament along with their parallel passages. This early synopsis of the Gospels made it easier to read the entire account of any particular gospel incident.

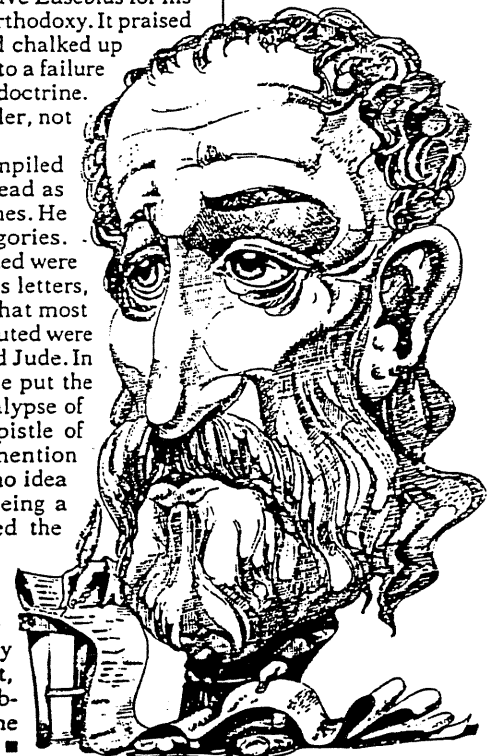
Eusebius published another list, this one establishing him as "the father of church history" because it was the first comprehensive account of the founding and growth of Christianity. Grouping his material according to the reigns of Rome's emperors, he tells the story of the succession of the bishops in the most important churches, recounts the development of Christian doctrine through the biographies of theologians, and calls the church to remember its heroes by recounting the triumphs of the martyrs. Eusebius quoted from his sources extensively, often providing the only record of otherwise unknown works. His passion for including everything makes his work a gold mine for those seeking to understand the church's first 300 years.

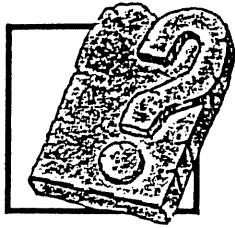
Perhaps it was his confidence in his ability as a systematizer that led Eusebius to recommend his creed to the council at Nicaea in 325 as a model of orthodoxy. Unfortunately, his creed was vague on the relationship of Jesus to his father, the crucial point at issue, and caused some to suspect him of heresy. Constantine, the emperor, was an admirer of Eusebius, and protected him with his imperial authority. After the council, a theological guerrilla war broke out with Athanasius on one side, Arius on the other, and Eusebius in the middle. Eusebius seemed to feel that Athanasius was the more dan-

gerous enemy, and used his influence against him. The church eventually came to accept the doctrinal position of Athanasius, but forgave Eusebius for his opposition to the champion of orthodoxy. It praised him for his historical work, and chalked up his mistreatment of Athanasius to a failure to understand a complicated doctrine. After all, Eusebius was a compiler, not an original thinker.

One of the lists Eusebius compiled was that of the various books read as Scripture in the different churches. He divided them into three categories. The books that everyone recognized were the four Gospels and Acts, Paul's letters, 1 Peter, and 1 John. The books that most churches accepted but some disputed were James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. In the class of inauthentic books he put the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Didache, and the Epistle of Barnabas. Eusebius did not mention Hebrews specifically, and had no idea what to do with Revelation. Being a good compiler, he simply listed the arguments for and against it.

Eusebius is valuable because he gives us a picture of what the church was thinking about the Canon around 325. Interestingly enough, it was his great opponent, Athanasius, who in 367 first published the list of the books of the New Testament as we know it. ■





Recent scholarship has emphasized strongly the alleged disunity of Scripture.

ple of God as a whole. To the extent we fall into individualistic misunderstandings of revelation, we will be left with a sense of the insufficiency and incompleteness of the Bible. We will have difficulty in seeing that God's revelation to his people is complete and that the New Testament canon is closed.

The New Testament canon is closed

We may conclude, then, that the church can be confident its New Testament is complete. There is nothing included that should be excluded, nothing missing that should be included. But does that mean we may never receive another inspired apostolic writing—say, the "previous" letter mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9?

First, we ought to appreciate the sheer improbability of such a discovery. It cuts against the reason why God has given Scripture to the church in the first place. It is a matter of tradition that he intends for the church to hold fast and preserve. And the church cannot retain what it does not have.

Also, the church would have to be far less fragmented than it has been for the past 1,000 years for it to recognize and then agree that such a new writing was indeed canonical. Such recognition could hardly claim continuity with what took place in the church during the first four centuries when it was always a matter of deciding about documents that had all along been extant. But now there would be a new document abruptly introduced after nearly 2,000 years.

But suppose, after all, this hypothetical document were discovered, and that it could be competently decided that it ought to be included in the church's Scriptures. That would still not mean that the present Canon is or had been open or incomplete. Rather, we ought to conclude that the church, by this addition, has been given a new Canon. But just this idea of a new Canon—an abrupt expansion after such a long time of the church's apostolic foundation—is highly speculative and difficult to square with New Testament teaching.

The product of fallible men?

Granting the existence of inscripturated revelation, there are three basic positions on the New Testament canon. Two of these involve some form of the inherently self-contradictory notion of an "open" canon.

The New Testament is a human anthology of divinely inspired writings. Strictly speaking, this view denies that God is the Author of Scripture (as a whole). The collective entity is the product of fallible men, not the infallible construct of God. What we have in Scripture ultimately is the "whole counsel of man," not God.

Inevitably, this view impairs the meaning of the Canon and renders its authority defective.

Each inspired document of Scripture does not have its authority or its overall intelligibility in isolation but in relation to the others, within the context provided by the Bible as a whole. All the documents of Scripture together constitute the frame in terms of which any one is to be understood finally and comprehensively. Consequently, to say that frame is humanly fixed precludes talking about the unity of the Bible. It casts a shadow of uncertainty on every single document, and so undercuts the supreme authority of Scripture.

The New Testament is a complete entity shaped by God, but is continually supplemented by additional living prophetic voices in the church. This view involves a dualistic misunderstanding of revelation. In one way or other, a distinction is made between a completed, canonical revelation for the whole church and ongoing private revelations for individual believers or particular groups of believers. The problem with this view is its conflict with the covenantal, redemptive-historical character of all revelation. God does not reveal himself along two tracks, one public and one private.

Certainly we may not dictate to God what he can or cannot do, on occasion, in revealing himself today. We must guard against boxing in the Holy Spirit by our theological constructions. At all times the Spirit is sovereign and free, like the wind, as Jesus says, that "blows wherever it pleases." In his freedom, however, the Spirit orders his activity, and that order, according to Scripture, does not encourage believers today to seek or otherwise expect forms of extrabiblical revelation.

The New Testament is that complete entity in which, along with the Old Testament, God gives his Word and brings his authority to expression, without restriction, in a definitive and absolute way. This view suggests a self-authenticating Canon—one that God in his providence has given to the church. It is a view of Scripture that is most faithful to the apostolic witness of the New Testament itself.

Admittedly, this view leaves some questions unanswered. Perhaps the most perplexing relates to the number of canonical books: Why, of all the inspired apostolic writings, just these 27? Why not 28 or 26 or some other number—especially when other writings seem credible?

To this quantitative question we must be content to say that these 27 books are what God has chosen to preserve, and he has not told us why. It seems difficult to improve on the comment Calvin made in passing on Ephesians 3:4. "These [books] which the Lord judged to be necessary for his church have been selected by his providence for everlasting remembrance." ■

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., is professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.