

# Canon of Scripture

## Lesson 12

### I. The New Testament in the Age of Printing

- a. The **dimensions** of the New Testament canon were not seriously affected by the fifteenth-century revival of learning or age of enlightenment in the sixteenth-century Reformation.
- b. The study of the New Testament in **Greek**, which had become more accessible in the west, did in fact make an impact on all phases of Biblical study.
- c. But questions within the canon were reopened. Many still struggled with individual books. For example, Erasmus denied the Pauline authorship of Hebrews and questioned the traditional authorship of the 'disputed **catholic** epistles':
  1. Letter of **James**
  2. First & Second Epistle of **Peter**
  3. First, Second, & Third Epistles of **John**
  4. Epistle of **Jude**
- d. He also thought that on grounds **of style** the Apocalypse could not be attributed to the author of John's Gospel. And, he insisted that the study of the Vulgate was no substitute for the study of the scriptures in their original languages.

### II. Luther's New Testament

- a. Luther's own views on the New Testament canon gained wide acceptance and support with the publication of his German New Testament in **1522**. For this work he used Erasmus's second edition of 1519 Greek translation.
- b. The table of contents suggested that he distinguished two **levels** of canonicity in the New Testament. Luther separated Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation, making them a second tier of canon.
- c. Luther did not exclude the last four books from the canon, but he did not recognize in them the **high** quality of 'the right certain capital books', and expressed his opinion forthrightly in his individual prefaces to these books.
- d. In his preface to Hebrews, he wrote, that it was written by '*an excellent man of learning, (probably **Apollos**) who had been a disciple of the apostles and had learned from them, and who was very well versed in scripture*'.
- e. In his preface to James in his 1522 New Testament, he calls it 'an epistle of **straw**'. He believes that it contradicts Paul and the other scriptures on justification by faith, and, while it promotes law, it does not promote Christ.
- f. He thought that the small book of Jude was a superfluous document; an abstract of **2 Peter**. (Nowadays it would be generally agreed that 2 Peter is based on Jude, not vice versa.)
- g. Moreover, Luther maintained that Jude is suspect because it contains history and teaching found **nowhere** else in scripture. This he specifically identified in reference to the Enoch quotation and the dispute about the body of Moses.  
*Jude 14 And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, KJV Jude 9 Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee. KJV*
- h. As for Revelation, said Luther, it '**lacks** everything that I hold as apostolic or prophetic'. Luther knew that those books had been disputed in earlier days: that, however, is not his main reason for relegating them to a secondary status.
- i. He appears to have had no difficulty with 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John, which had also been disputed. His main reason is that in the four relegated books he could not find that clear promotion of Christ which was his **principal** mark of Holy Scripture.
- j. If one asked for Luther's criterion of canonicity (or at least primary canonicity), his belief was: 'That which does not teach **Christ** is still not apostolic, even if it were the teaching of Peter or Paul.
- k. On the other hand, he thought that anything that preaches Christ would be apostolic **even if** Judas, Annas, Pilate or Herod wrote it.'
- l. The recognition of an 'inner canon' within the wider canon has persisted in the **Lutheran** tradition to the present day: the 'inner canon' is a Pauline canon.

### III. Early English Versions

- a. In the later part of 1525 A.D. the printing of William **Tyndale's** English translation of the New Testament was begun in Cologne. He worked in constant danger under Catholic Emperor Charles V.
- b. Tyndale was in danger but so was anyone who would dare to read or **possess** a book that he had printed. It was a crime punishable by torture, burning at the stake, or actual burial alive, for anyone to read, purchase, or possess any New Testament book.
- c. Prior to his martyrdom, it is estimated that Tyndale circulated **50,000** copies of the New Testament. Early in 1526, Tyndale's New Testament's began pouring into England concealed in cases of merchandise, barrels, bales of cloths, sacks of flour and corn, and every other secret way which could be found.
- d. In 1537 the Matthew's Version was prepared by John Rogers who used the **pseudonym** Thomas Matthew. The reason for this was that Rogers, a known friend of Tyndale, and felt his work would be more acceptable to various authorities if this relationship was not known.
- e. Matthew's Version was the first revision of the Tyndale Bible. It was **approved** by King Henry VIII, who had hated Tyndale and his work. Rogers would later be burned to death during the reign of Mary Tudor in 1555.

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- f. Another significant Bible was The **Great Bible** version of 1539. The notes and prefaces of Tyndale's and Coverdale's translations aroused so much argument that Henry VIII authorized a new version which eliminated the controversy over note material.
- g. It was called the great Bible because of its **size**. Due to its extreme value it was usually chained to a reading post within a church. In 1538 the King issued an injunction to all churches to purchase a copy of the great Bible.
- h. The GB was to be paid for by the Parson and parishioners. The importance of the great Bible is that it became the **first** official English Bible appointed to be read in all the churches, the King James Bible is basically a revision of the great Bible.

### IV. John Calvin

- a. Calvin accepted the New Testament canon as it had been handed down. For him the authority of the New Testament, like that of all scripture, rested not on any church **decree**.
- b. To Calvin, one recognized that which is canonical on the self-authenticating quality of what was written, attested in the receptive heart by the **inward** witness of the Holy Spirit.
- c. Unlike Luther, he had no difficulty in accepting James: 'it contains nothing unworthy of an apostle of Christ.' But he would not commit himself positively on who he thought might have **written it**.
- d. The specific identity of the James who wrote the Epistle of James was in **question** for Calvin. He thought he might be James the Just or James the son of Alphaeus, one of the twelve (whom he took to be the 'pillar' James of Gal 2:9).
- e. As for **2 Peter**, if it is canonical and therefore trustworthy, it must be accepted as having come from Peter. Not that he wrote it himself, but that one of his disciples composed it by his command and included '*what the necessity of the times demanded.*'
- f. Calvin accepted that **1 John** was the work of the beloved disciple. When Jude introduces himself at the beginning of his epistle as 'the brother of James', Calvin believed he was referring to James the son of Alphaeus.

### V. Council of Trent

- a. The Council of Trent, at its fourth session (April 1546 A.D.), dealt with the canon of scripture. Its position differed from that of the Reformers but not with regard to the **contents** of the New Testament canon.
- b. Their primary concern was the according of equal veneration with scripture to the '**unwritten** traditions' received ultimately 'from the mouth of Christ himself by the apostles, or from the apostles themselves at the dictation of the Holy Spirit'.
- c. The Council also specified the 'ancient and vulgate edition' of the Latin Bible to be the **one** authentic text of scripture. This, of course, created a further schism between Roman Catholic and Protestants who preferred the Hebrew and Greek texts.
- d. Some modern interpreters of this decree of Trent suggest that the Vulgate was singled out as authoritative over against more recent Latin versions of the Bible and that it was **not** intended to affirm its primacy over the Hebrew and Greek texts.
- e. A **century** after the Council of Trent the Westminster Assembly of Divines stated that '*the Old Testament in Hebrew ... and the New Testament in Greek ... , being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.*'

### VI. The Westminster Confession

- a. In the tradition of Calvin, the Westminster Confession in **1646** denied that the authority of scripture rests 'upon the testimony of any man or church'; rather, they said, '*our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.*'
- b. Westminster made allowance for the place **of reason** in the study of scripture and for the acceptance of whatever may be deduced from it '*by good and necessary consequence*', yet '*nothing at any time is to be added*' to it, '*whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.*'
- c. The considered the canon of scripture **closed**. '*Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word.*'

### VII.A Fixed Canon

- a. The New Testament consists of the twenty-seven books. This is what has been established by the various churches from the **fourth** century on. There is no debate about this established fact.
- b. The most disputed of all the disputed books of the New Testament is probably **2 Peter**, but the New Testament would be diminished without it.
- c. 2 Peter, in particular provides a special insight into the process of sanctification. In it we see the unequivocal statement that God's purpose is that his people should 'become **partakers** of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4).
- d. In the Bible, comprised of both Old and New Testaments, the voice of God is heard as it is heard in **no** other book. For this reason the settled canon has a relevance for all to whom the word of God is addressed.

### VIII. Application

- a. Through the ages multiple men and women were willing to suffer persecution and even to give up their lives to protect copies of the Bible.
  1. Paul says in Phil 2:17 Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all. KJV What has changed in the hearts of believers and in the modern culture in which we live that has brought about such a radical departure from the attitudes of believers who counted it a joy to be martyred?
  2. Would you be willing to be persecuted or suffer death to protect your access to your personal Bible?