Special Emphasis: The Canon of Scripture

Now let us discuss the authority of the New Testament, the matter of the canon. This is somewhat of a timely issue for us, and it is always an issue for the church.

What is a canon? The word *canon* is Greek, transliterated from the Hebrew *kanah*. A *kanah* is a reed or a stalk or a measuring-rod. It is used in Ezekiel, for example, to talk about measuring depths of water. There are marks on the reed, somewhat like a ruler. There are two very important senses of what a canon is. The term originally meant something like a rail or a post, but it came to be used metaphorically as a rule or a principle. We see this in the New Testament. Paul uses the word in 2 Corinthians 10. If you look just briefly in 2 Corinthians 10, verses 13, 15, and 16, he writes, “We however, will not boast beyond proper limits”—that would be boundaries, that is the word *canon* there—“but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. We are not going too far in our boasting”—as would be the case, again, beyond the limits—“neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others.” The idea of a limit or a standard or a rule leads us to a very important distinction that we need to make in terms of two senses of this word canon.

Usually when we talk about the canon, we talk about it in a passive sense—something has been canonized. As a result, when we talk about the history of the canon (and a lot of critical scholars take this approach, this passive sense, as the main way to talk about the canon), we might say, “When were the books of the New Testament recognized or canonized by the church?” The answer, in terms of conciliar ratification, is the middle of the fourth century. A little earlier than this, the NT canon was listed in the Festal Letter of Bishop Athanasius, but the canon was not “officially” ratified until the middle of the fourth century. As a result, some scholars who wish to undermine biblical authority will speak of how late canonization occurred. They will say that prior to this, there were multiple, different Christianities and all these different gospels as well. But those descriptions fail to account for another fundamental meaning of “canon,” *the active sense*. The active rather than passive meaning of “canon” refers to how the books of the NT mark out the boundary or norm for Christian faith and life—the *regula fidei* in Latin, the *canon tes pisteos* in Greek. This “rule of faith” is one of the most important criteria, along with apostolic origin, of these various books that were recognized—again, I stress, were recognized—as authoritative in the Christian churches.

Of course the word canon has a passive sense, “to be canonized,” referring to the list of 27 NT books that have been recognized by the church as normative. In the second century, Marcion introduced a list that recognized the Pauline letters, almost exclusively as authoritative. Marcion held a dualistic, gnostic worldview that led him to reject the Old Testament and all of the Gospels (except a portion of Luke) as too Jewish. He even viewed the Creator God of the OT as a demiurge or second-tier god. Here, I want to illustrate the way in which the active and passive sense of “canon” worked together, by the power of the Holy Spirit to edify the church. In other words, there were authorized eyewitnesses, whose accounts of events and pastoral letters “marked out” an authoritative norm for Christian belief and practice in its formative stage, that were later recognized officially by the church as having functioned in that way. We need to understand this, because it is very important. In the active sense, a certain account of Jesus’ life, Mark’s Gospel, for example, took hold in the Roman house churches because the testimony and way of life it marked out was in continuity with the way Israel’s God had worked in the past and in continuity with their own experiences with Jesus’ followers. In the passive sense, they “recognized” Mark’s Gospel as true to the events of Jesus’ life and true to the faith he taught. Having come from a trustworthy source and having proved itself useful in the house churches for their worship and instruction, Mark’s Gospel was recognized as authoritative. The early Christians were willing to die to
preserve this Gospel, but they were not willing to die for that one over there. And when you read that one over there—like the Gospel of Thomas, or the Gospel of Judas, or the Gospel of Life, or the Gospel of Truth, these various Gnostic gospels that were discovered in the Nag Hammadi documents—you can tell immediately that they are of a different character. They are of a fundamentally different worldview. They do not follow the plot and grammar of the story of Israel’s God and his covenant people, nor do they “ring true” to the character of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. Because of that, those so-called “gospels” were not widely used and failed both to mark out and to be recognized as norms of Christian faith and practice. They do not meet the test of canonicity either in the active or the passive sense.

Bonhoeffer wrote, “The Word as inspired by the Spirit exists only when men hear it, so that the church makes the Word just as the Word makes the church into the church.” Bonhoeffer said it a little bit differently than I might say it, but he is saying something that is really important. In other words, the Word of God is for the people of God. The Word of God is not just authoritative in its own sense, although it is that. It is authoritative, on the one hand, because it is rooted in the character of God, but it is authoritative, on the other hand, because it is intended for and used by the people of God. It has a purpose to reflect God’s character, to call them to covenant faithfulness and to disciple them. So it is the Word of God for the people of God. In another place, Bonhoeffer affirms the priority and gift of the Word and the sinfulness of human efforts to get above or behind it, so I think what he means is that God’s Word is spoken to and through God’s people. Think about it. From the very beginning, how is it that we have this “rule of faith”? The first example we have is Moses. God has always chosen authorized spokesmen to instruct His people in the truth, in the rule of faith and practice. God spoke the stars into being, but we were not there, so how would we know about creation? We know because we have been given that story through our father Moses, who preserved it for us, and the people of God, the covenant community, has passed it down to us. This gets at the essence of the canon in this active, testifying, commissioning, and sanctioning sense.

So we have a limit. What is the limit? One important limit that necessitates a canon is death. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is about to die on Mount Nebo. He is not going into the land, and so something very interesting happens there. He records for the second generation of the Exodus community an accurate account of the events of Sinai, but now he is aiming this account—Deuteronomy over against Exodus—in preparation for the second Exodus generation’s entrance into the land. They are in a different place than their parents. This is not the first generation gathered and encamped around Sinai, but the second encamped on the banks of the Jordan River, about to go into the land of Canaan. Their pastoral needs are different from those of their parents, but remember Moses is about to die. So, how will they know the rule of faith and practice? How will they know how to live in the land in a faithful way? Deuteronomy 4 says, “Ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth. Ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation by trials, by signs, by wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and by great deeds of terror?”

Did you notice the second person personal pronoun? Did they hear God speak out of fire? This is the second generation; they were not present at Mount Sinai. How do they know that God spoke out of fire? They know because Moses saw it, and Moses, the authorized spokesman, is telling them. They know also because their parents told them. So we see this limit in answer to the question, “How are we going to pass along an authoritative account of our identity? In one way, I think, it is very helpful to look at the canon as God’s Spirit-authorized curriculum for trans-generational discipleship. In other words, the canon is about passing the authoritative story along that enables us to continue to be the people of God,
generation after generation. We cannot be shaped as the people of God unless we have God’s Word, but because we are finite and straddle only a couple of generations, we need an authoritative, authentic Word about that which came before. The Bible has what some theologians (like Sinclair Ferguson) have called “a canonical self-consciousness.” There must be a sense of passing along, through authorized spokesmen, the truth about who God is and how He works in His world. If we go back to Deuteronomy 5, we see that Moses summons all of Israel, the second generation about to go into the land, and tells them, “Hear O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them.” That is what the Word of God is about: telling us who God is and what He expects of us as people. God’s Word tells us how the world really is, what is real about the world. Moses continues, “The \textsc{LORD} our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the \textsc{LORD} make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The \textsc{LORD} spoke with you face to face at the mountain out of the midst of the fire while I stood between the \textsc{LORD} and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the \textsc{LORD}.” These verses give us an excellent snapshot of the active sense of the canon. This group of people were not at Sinai. Most of them had not yet been born. They did not hear God speak out of the fire. How did they know? They knew because God’s authorized spokesman was there. He saw it, and he passed along that account to them as if they had been there! “Not with our fathers, but with us . . . God made a covenant at Horeb.”

So there is evidence within the Old Testament, then, of a canonical self-consciousness. Sinclair Ferguson, in a wonderful article called “How Does the Bible Look at Itself?” says, “There is a recognition that what is written is given by God to rule and direct His people. That is already indicated by the fact that written documentation accompanies the covenant relationship between God and His people and it is intended to rule and direct their lives. The rest of the books of the Old Testament are written in exposition of this authoritative canonical covenant word.” We see, then, from the time that the tablets are given on Sinai, Moses wrote things down. He wrote down events of various battles. He wrote down the Book of the Covenant, various case laws that God told him to write down. What we see from the very beginning is that God’s revelation is not just about His deeds in history. God’s revelation is also about His interpretation of those deeds in history. God’s Revelation is both word and deed. What is interesting is that we do not just have some account of these laws and the way the people of God are supposed to keep those laws. We have a whole story associated with those laws. We have a whole sense of how those laws came about. God says in Exodus 19, verses 4-6, “See what I did to the Egyptians and how I brought you to myself on eagle’s wings and made you to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” So this canonical self-consciousness, if you will, of the fact that God has authorized spokesmen in the context of these events is often (although not always) also to interpret these things for us in a written account.

What we see from the beginning, then, is that the canonical curriculum has a peculiar grammar. It has a plotline. It has a peculiar shape. We learn from the very beginning about subject and verb and object in this peculiar grammar. We know something about that from the very first line of Scripture: Creator creates creation. In other words, God is the first subject. The creation did not just come about on its own. God Himself created it. We learn something about His character. He is a laborer. He is a worker. He is a gardener. He is a potter. So we understand something by the way in which the syntax and grammar of the first five books of Moses lay out God’s work in His world: That peculiar plotline, that peculiar worldview, sets a trajectory, and that trajectory has to be followed. If you deviate from that peculiar grammar, then people know that you are talking about something else. You must be talking about some other god, because there is an established plotline. There is an established grammar. This will be important in just a moment. There are established practices that reenact that story. Just think about how the worship of Israel, for example, reenacts the story of the Exodus. Every year, if you are a Jewish male, you are required by the law to come to Jerusalem three times a year. One of those times is the
Feast of Weeks. It is obvious that Passover has to do with the Exodus. Everybody remembers that story, but just think about the Feast of Weeks for a moment, what we now call Pentecost. Deuteronomy 26 tells us that everyone must come in and bring the first fruits of his harvest. They bring the firstlings of their flock. This is proof that God is faithful to His promises, because He said He would give a land to Abraham, and He brought them into this land. They cannot plant crops in the desert. They cannot plant crops in the wilderness. They can only plant crops when they have a place to live and they can put down roots. God was faithful to His promise of land. And so in the very act of worship, in the very liturgy of Israel, you have the retelling and the reenactment of the story of their redemption. Of course, we have that in the New Testament with the Lord’s Supper, with the structure of Gospel-centered worship. With confession and assurance of pardon, we have a reenactment of the Gospel, of the good news of Jesus Christ. So the canon has a peculiar grammar and plotline.

So the Bible is not simply the Word of God, but it is the Word of God to God’s people. It is a good act of communication that accounts for the needs of its audience. Part of the needs of its audience include the fact that we were not there when these events happened, and so God is providing for that need through authoritative, appointed spokesmen. However, Israel’s story is unfinished. As Jews, they knew that redemptive history was building to a climax under God’s direction and that the focal point of history was still to come. This is what we talked about with the hope of a Davidic Messiah, the hope of priestly purity, the hope of restoring the land and of God breaking into history to set things right. The great story of the Hebrew Scriptures was looking for a conclusion. So when we start to read the New Testament, when we start reading the Gospel of Matthew, how does the Gospel of Matthew begin? It begins with a genealogy, and not a genealogy concerning the Chinese, but a genealogy that talks about the Hebrew people. In other words, Matthew is picking up a story that is already underway. It follows the plotline. It follows the peculiar grammar of the canon. All these threads and all these categories that talk about who Jesus is and who the church is and who the people of God are are categories established in the story of Israel. They have already been established in the covenant relationship between the creator-redeemer God and His continuing covenant people. It is a fulfillment of the new covenant, so the application of Old Testament texts by New Testament writers respects the integrity of God’s character and plan and does not fracture the plotline of God’s story, but recognizes its debt to the earlier story. Jesus came preaching the Gospel of God, saying, “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand.” There is a sense that Jesus is aware, that Paul is aware, that Luke is aware that the things that they are talking about are God’s words. The New Testament writers go to great lengths to show who the authorized spokesmen are. The fact that the Spirit comes upon Jesus is echoing the stories of the Old Testament prophets to show that Jesus is anointed with prophetic authority. He does not speak on His own, but He speaks from God. That is what He says in John’s Gospel about the Father’s witness to Him.

So this brings us to this: We have finally come to the New Testament. We have set a lot of groundwork here. Some may have wondered when we would ever get to the New Testament. You were wondering, “Why is he talking about Deuteronomy? Why are we on the banks of the Jordan?” The reason is this: the apostles did not transmit a tradition after it had been given a fixed form by the faith of the church, but because of the authority the apostles had been given to them by Christ himself to be the bearers and custodians of the tradition, the church would recognize their authority. In redemptive history, the apostles’ job was not just to do the work of ministry with Jesus, but perhaps more importantly their job was to convey an authoritative, eyewitness account of what Jesus did and what it meant (see Ridderbos). If you were just to look at the events of the first century in the Mediterranean basin from the perspective of Roman political history, the death of this man from Nazareth can be understood as just some insignificant Messianic pretender who was causing so much civil disorder that the Jewish leaders wanted Him killed. So they killed him, and they were done with it. That would be the end of the story from the perspective of secular history. How do we know the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection? It is
because the Gospel writers, the evangelists, and Paul and Peter all tell us what the events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection mean. The proper understanding of Paul’s concept of tradition is clear from 1 Corinthians 15. That, of course, is just a recounting of the Gospel, where he lists in succession the apostolic witnesses who vouch for the content of Jesus’ resurrection. Their witness, not the belief of the church in some fixed form, determines the idea of tradition in Corinthians. I will quote from Ridderbos:

The material authority of the New Testament originates in the history of redemption—the communication and transmission of what was seen and heard in the fullness of time. Christ established a formal authority structure to be the source and standard for all future preaching of the Gospel. The apostles’ role in the history of redemption was unique and unrepeatable. They not only received revelation but were also the bearers and organs of revelation. It was their most important task as a foundation of the church. So it was Scripture, the Word of God—initially Hebrew Scripture read Christologically—which had the consensus, the community, the institution-building power to make these communities the overwhelmingly dominant and central universal church. It does not seem far-fetched to say that it was the Bible that conquered the empire in defiance of the normal laws of sociological gravity, nonviolently, despite persecution, without special economic, social, or cultural support.

It is the Word of God that generates these communities. We see that when Paul comes to Thessalonica. He says, “You received the word, not as a word from men, but as it is, in fact, the word of God.” So all that preparation brings us to the challenges that we have today, the challenges from people like Bart Ehrman, Elaine Pagels and The Da Vinci Code, who say that the NT is really politically-sanctioned orthodoxy. According to their account of it, the fourth-century church authorized these books because of political needs in terms of the bishops holding on to power and establishing certain brands of Christianity. The problem with their account is that it picks up the story of the canon way too late. It fails to account for the active sense of what a canon is and does and how documents (recognized as canonical much later) functioned authoritatively in the life of nascent Christian communities. How is it that the council and the bishops rejected the Gnostic gospels? Why did that happen? Well, there may well have been political issues. I do not doubt that. These people were political people, but the fundamental issue is that these gospels told a different story. They had a different plotline. These gospels do not follow the peculiar grammar of the Scriptures. In fact, they fracture that grammar. They tell of a different god, not the creator-God who made everything good. They teach a different, escapist salvation about the spirit—about the soul—and that the only thing that is really useful in the life of Jesus are His teachings, His sayings. And so if you look at the Gospel of Thomas, for example, it contains very, very little about events in Jesus’ life. It is not a history; it is just a collection of sayings. The Gospel of Judas is the same way. Why are these “gospels” collections of sayings? They are wisdom teachings that have to do with spiritual knowledge, secret knowledge that is supposed to allow you, if you embrace it, to escape from this terrible world and for your soul to live on. That is a different grammar, a different plotline, a different story. That story was the one that Marcion wanted to tell in the second century, and it was rejected then because it was a different story. Later we have the whole business about Arius’ challenge and the Gnostic gospels, the challenge of Gnosticism that even John was beginning to fight against at the end of the first century. How did they know what was true and what was false? They knew because of God’s authorized spokesmen, the active sense of this canonical self-consciousness, and a peculiar grammar that already had set a trajectory about who this God is and what story He is telling. So they recognized that other, gnostic grammar and rejected it.

As you may know, there are 27 books in the New Testament. There is something important to understand here in terms of the development. Much in the same way that the Mosaic Law establishes a trajectory, for how the history of Israel will be evaluated in the rest of the OT, the Gospels and Paul’s
Letters establish the “rule of faith” for the NT. Why is it that we have the former prophets—Samuel and Kings? They evaluate Israel and Judah’s history on the basis of the covenant, on the basis of Deuteronomy, so we can see again that story playing out. In much the same way, in the New Testament, the four Gospels and Paul’s Letters were received very early on, and established the sense of what is authoritative. Those two collections were the first books to be collected together. Then, with that canonical core, if you will, decisions would be made later about other letters, especially the general letters and the Revelation of John.

Now, one important qualification is that a canonical book needs to have apostolic authority. It does not necessarily have to be written by an apostle, but it has to be written by someone who was directly connected with an apostle. So we have John Mark, who was associated with both Peter and Paul and Luke who was Paul’s traveling companion. We do not know who wrote Hebrews, so how did Hebrews get in the canon? Early on, Hebrews was thought to be Pauline. It is probably not Pauline. I think the best candidate for the author of the letter to the Hebrews is Apollos. But here is the fundamental issue of the letter to the Hebrews: It is a sermon that tells the same story. It follows the regula fidei. It is about the same Jesus. In other words, the canonical core of the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles helped the churches to evaluate and make decisions about the other letters. Some of the general letters were received either in the East or in the West early on, but not in the other region of the church, for whatever reasons, until a little later. The canonical core helped the other parts of the church see that books that originated in other regions (and thus were received earlier) told the same story.

Someone might ask about the book of James. James was mainly questioned later, but not in the first few centuries. We have Luther to thank for that, and so Luther, because of his own theological agenda about justification, and in some ways perhaps reducing Paul’s gospel to justification, raised questions about James. We will come to that later, but there were not many early problems with James. The questions about the canonicity of James arose later.

This has been really helpful for me in terms of addressing some of the questions that are extant in the culture right now. There is a lot of bad history out there, first of all. Second, there are a lot of people who want to generate controversy in order to sell books, though not everyone who would challenge orthodoxy is like that. To be able to see through the various motivations for saying certain things about Jesus and the New Testament, this idea of a peculiar grammar and the active sense of the canon has really helped me. You see, “Why is it that people are willing to die for certain documents and not willing to die for others?” It has to do with telling the same story and recognizing that story.

To clarify one more time about the passive sense of the canon, let me say this: In the passive sense, the church creates a list that recognizes the active sense of the canon. The church recognizes the authority of the canon. The church does not give authority to the canon, but it recognizes its authority. I think that is an important distinction to make.

In terms of setting the stage, we have built the stage, and now we can come to the Gospels in our next lesson. I am looking forward to that. Before we conclude, I want to answer one question from earlier about the distinction between Judaism and Christianity in the first century and when the Christians began to be considered as a separate sect and persecuted.

Some of what we know, we learn from a letter written by Pliny in the early 100s, early in the second century. Pliny was a governor out in Bythinia, western Asia Minor, around the turn of the century, and he wondered what to do about those Christians, because people were starting to complain. The main issue was that Christians were becoming more and more distinguished from Jews. The Jewish faith had
certain protections under Roman law, because of their history with Herod. It started with Julius Caesar, and he allowed them to keep from doing things like sacrificing to the emperor and paying taxes that were going to support the temple of Jupiter and these sorts of things that were required of other people. In the beginning, as a Messianic Jewish reform movement, Christianity was under those protections, but as there was a “parting of the ways” and early Christians were thrown out of the synagogues, then people started to wonder about this new religion. It began to be viewed not as an ancient, historic religion, but as a superstition, and that was a big slight against Christianity. People felt like, “This is a recent development. We do not know what they are doing in their secret meetings.” It started off as people having a grudge against individual business owners or individual people, and they just wanted to get them in trouble because they were mad at them.

Then, Nero tried to make the Christians a scapegoat for the fire in Rome, but the Roman citizens were suspicious of him, because he was crazy, and they knew he was crazy. However, what we see with the growth of Christianity—and it was rapid in the last third of the first century—is growing influence that kept people from participating in the emperor cult in any way. That was a problem, because the emperor cult was a way of maintaining control, and so the Christian movement began to be viewed as subversive by the Roman leadership. By the time of Domitian in the 90s, there was active killing and persecution of Christians, and so it was probably in the context of Domitian that the book of Revelation emerged. Revelation probably emerged in the organized campaign of active martyrdom, not just a spotty persecution. Hebrews was probably talking about how the Jews were expelled from Rome under Claudius; there were Christians involved who were viewed as Jews. There was a disruption; people lost their homes and businesses. It was bad, but then people came back. Suetonius wrote that, in Claudius’s reign, there was a controversy over “Chrestus.” That is probably “Christ.” This internal Jewish dispute broke into the open when there was an institutional shift and the church became very distinct from the synagogue after the fall of the temple, after the consolidation of rabbinic Judaism. Beginning around 80 or 85, there was an active sense of this separation.