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The Inspired Community: A Glance at Canon History

EVERETT R. KALIN

The author is associate professor of exegetical theology (New Testament) at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

THE LEADERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH WHO GAVE US THE FIRST LISTS OF NEW Testament Scriptures asserted the inspiration of these books but did not regard inspiration as the basis of their uniqueness. They saw the inspiration of the Scriptures as one aspect of a much broader activity of inspiration in the church. This article investigates the interrelationship between inspiration and canonicity and attempts tentative contemporary applications of the fathers' perspective.

Is it the inspiration of the Biblical books that makes them different from other books? This article¹ addresses that question. It is primarily a historical study of the attitudes of the early church's leaders as they were distinguishing books that they regarded as New Testament Scriptures from other books. Thus the article's primary concern is to focus on the question whether or not it was the inspiration of the Biblical books that made them different from other books in the eyes of the early church leaders who shaped the New Testament canon. After the historical survey, a brief attempt will be made to suggest possible contemporary applications of the findings.

When one investigates the history of the canonization of the New Testament, he is interested not only in numbers and names but also in criteria. That is, for canon history it is of interest to know in regard to an early church writer (Cyril of Jerusalem, for instance) not only how many books

were in his New Testament (26) and which they were (all of our 27 except the Apocalypse) but also what in his eyes distinguished these books from all others. (Cyril believed that these were the books handed down to the church by the apostles and ancient bishops, whose ordinances were not to be altered. See Catecheses 4.35.) It is often said that the criteria that prevailed in the process of setting aside the New Testament books were apostolic authorship, wide usage by the earliest men of the church, and true teaching. Thus a book that was not in someone's New Testament collection might have been thought by him not to be by an apostle, to have been used little or not at all in the ancient church, or to be heretical in its teaching.

What about the criterion of inspiration in this context? Surely Cyril believed that the books in his New Testament were not only apostolic, widely used, and orthodox, but also inspired by the Holy Spirit. Would he have gone on to say, however, that all the books outside his New Testament were noninspired?

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper originally given at Webster College, Webster Groves, Missouri.

That is precisely what is often assumed by people who read back into the life of the early church a view that has gained some currency today. Many people in the church today seem to assume that the writings that are inspired are the Scriptures, and all else, no matter how orthodox and valuable and edifying, is "noninspired." According to this view, everything within the canon of Scripture would be called inspired, everything outside would be called noninspired. The Westminster Confession of 1647—to quote from a Reformed confession—seems to be operating in these categories when it declares: "The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of scripture; and therefore of no authority to the church of God, nor to be otherwise approved, or made use of, than any other human writings." Here books are said to lie outside the canon of Scripture because they are regarded as "noninspired." Similarly, when the editor of a 19th-century edition of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* says that that book possesses "a value to subsequent ages which belongs to no other uninspired work," he is apparently operating with the assumption that everything that one might call inspired is part of the Scripture. This rather common view can be expressed in two statements: (1) Scripture is inspired; (2) Non-Scripture is noninspired.

I. THE VIEW OF THE FATHERS²

When one examines the writings of the

² The material in Part I, the historical section of this article, is developed in detail in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Argument from Inspiration in the Canonization of the New Testament" (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Divinity School, 1967).

fathers of the church, he is struck by a picture that is quite different from the one just sketched. It is true, of course, that the fathers frequently and emphatically called the Scriptures inspired. They agreed with statement one: Scripture is inspired. They did not, however, agree with statement two: Non-Scripture is noninspired. In fact, the inspiration that the fathers ascribed to the Scriptures is only one facet of what they regarded as a much wider inspiration, for the fathers saw the inspiring activity of the Holy Spirit at work in many aspects of the church's life. The Scriptures were for the fathers inspired, but the inspiration of the Scriptures was not that which distinguished them from all other Christian writing and speaking.³

³ Lest the thesis of this article be misunderstood, I reemphasize at this point the narrow scope of the investigation. It asks whether the fathers distinguished Scripture from non-Scripture *by the criterion of inspiration*. In asserting that they did not do this I am not implying that they did not regard the Scriptures as unique. The fathers clearly did see the Scriptures as different from other books in important respects. What these differences were is of course the concern of any treatment of the history of the canon. To discuss the criteria various fathers used lies outside the scope of this article, but a few brief remarks are offered. Many early Christian writers in discussing the uniqueness of the books of the New Testament stressed that these books were widely used by the earliest men of the church. By making this assertion the fathers were stressing the apostolicity of these books, and that in two senses. The books were believed to have been entrusted to the church by the apostles and/or to have been composed by apostles. The reason various fathers singled out as unique certain documents they believed to be *apostolic* is that they were convinced that the apostles had a unique historical relationship to Jesus Christ. Any discussion of the uniqueness of New Testament Scriptures ought to have as its starting point the uniqueness of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, events the fathers saw as the focal

The thesis that the Scriptures were only one of the phenomena that the early church considered to be inspired by the Spirit of God can be demonstrated both by taking a look at the process of the canonization of the New Testament and by citing examples of the fathers' use of the term *inspiration*.⁴

A. *The Canonization of the New Testament*

If indeed the fathers tied the term *inspired* so closely to the Scriptures that everything, oral and written, outside the Scriptures was regarded by them as non-inspired, one would expect that the contrast *inspired/noninspired* would occur as they discussed reasons why some books were to be included in the Scriptures

point of God's renewing action in human history. A new and extremely helpful discussion of the process of canonization is Albert C. Sundberg Jr., "The Making of the New Testament Canon," *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), pp. 1216—1224.

⁴ No one definition could do justice to what the fathers meant by the several terms relating to the concept of inspiration. Various fathers would have treated this idea quite differently. Some (for example, Athenagoras, following Plato and Philo) saw inspiration as a kind of holy madness in which the Holy Spirit displaced the person's human mind and controlled him as fully as a musician controlled an instrument as he plucked its strings. Inspiration would for these men be by definition ecstatic. Others (for example, Origen) violently resisted the idea that the Holy Spirit in any sense displaced a person's mind or will. Inspiration would for these men be by definition nonecstatic. In general one might say that inspiration is that process by which the Spirit of God directed men's witness to Jesus Christ. The thesis of this article is not dependent on a specific definition of the term *inspiration* if it can demonstrate that the various fathers used the same terms for the inspiration of Scripture and non-Scripture.

while others were to be left out. One would expect them to say that a certain book was "in" because it was inspired, but that another book was "out" because it was not inspired. This is precisely what many histories of the canon in fact claim to find.

In the last half of the second century a group called the Montanists arose within the church. The Montanists asserted, among other things, that they were receiving prophecies and revelations from the Holy Spirit. E. C. Blackman maintains that, in opposition to the Montanist movement, the early church distinguished the apostolic age from all subsequent ages as the only age in which the Spirit was given in full measure. The church declared, he claims, that "the age of enthusiasm was past, and the Spirit now spoke with final authority only through a book, viz., the collection of writings which originated in the age of the apostles."⁵ Robert Grant asserts, "The church thus answered Montanism by insisting that inspiration was limited to what came to be a canonical list of scripture."⁶

However, when one examines the fragments of the church's anti-Montanist polemic that have been preserved, for example, in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 5.14-19, he finds no evidence at all that the church confined inspiration either to the apostolic age, already then part of the past, or to a collection of writings that were believed to come from that age. In fact, one of the anti-Montanist writers from the late second century chided the Montanists

⁵ *Marcion and His Influence* (London: SPCK, 1948), pp. 33 f.

⁶ *The Letter and the Spirit* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 75.

that it had been 14 years since the Montanists had had a prophet among themselves, while "the prophetic gift must continue in the whole Church until the final coming, as the apostle insists."⁷

There is evidence that when the Jews in the early centuries of the Christian era closed their collection of Scripture, some of them asserted that there were no longer any canonical books being written because the inspiration of the Holy Spirit had stopped at the time of the last of the prophets. One form of this tradition reads: "When the last prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, died, the holy spirit ceased out of Israel."⁸ Those who espoused this view apparently believed that the Holy Spirit would renew His activity among them in the last days. But their own time, they claimed, was devoid of the presence of the Spirit; the age of prophecy was closed. Some investigators of the formation of the New Testament canon, taking this tradition of the Jews as a starting point, have claimed that when the early church closed its New Testament canon, it made an analogous assumption that the inspiration of the Spirit had ceased in the church with the death of the last of the apostles. But this is not the case at all. The idea that the Spirit had ceased in Israel with the last of the prophets was mentioned by several early Christian authors, among them Justin, Irenaeus, and Origen. But in every case the idea that the Spirit had ceased among the Jews with the last of the prophets was accompanied not by the idea that he had ceased among the Christians with the last of the apostles

but instead by the idea that the Holy Spirit, having ended his presence among the Jews, had been poured out in all His fullness and with all His gifts on the Christians, among whom He continued to abide and act. The fathers made reference in this context to Pentecost, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that they regarded as having continuing and not just temporary effect, an outpouring that was for the whole Christian community.

Krister Stendahl correctly observes that although the fathers again and again used the concept "inspired" in reference to the Scriptures, they almost never used the concept "noninspired" in reference to writings that they distinguished from the Scriptures. To their way of thinking, Scripture/non-Scripture was not synonymous with inspired/noninspired.⁹ Stendahl further observes that in the instance where one of the fathers did make a distinction between writings that are inspired and those that are not inspired, the designation "noninspired" was applied not to edifying orthodox writings but precisely to heretical writings. In other words, when early Christian authors on rare occasions declared a writing to be *not* inspired, they were not saying that although it was a fine writing it did not happen to be in the Bible and was thus not inspired. Rather, they were saying that such a writing was false and heretical and thus lay outside the sphere in which the Spirit's inspiration was operative, namely, the whole life of the Christian community.

⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.17.4.

⁸ Tosefta Sotah 13.2

⁹ "The Apocalypse of John and the Epistles of Paul in the Muratorian Fragment," in *Current Issues of New Testament Interpretation*, Essays in Honor of O. A. Piper, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 243 ff.

The best example known to me of this contrast of inspiration and noninspiration occurs in Origen's first homily on the Gospel of Luke. In commenting on Luke's words in the opening verses of his gospel, "Since many have taken in hand to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us . . .," Origen said: "The expression, 'they have taken in hand,' contains a hidden accusation against those who, apart from the gift of the Holy Spirit, rush into the composition of gospels. Matthew, indeed, and Mark and John and Luke did not 'take in hand' to write, but filled with the Holy Spirit they wrote gospels. . . . The Church has four gospels, heresy has a great number, one of which is entitled 'According to the Egyptians,' another 'According to the Twelve Apostles.' Basilides also dared to write a gospel and call it by his own name. 'Many have taken in hand' to write."

Thus Origen was contrasting the four gospels in our New Testament, written by the Holy Spirit, with other gospels, written apart from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The ones he declared to be not inspired were not orthodox products of the church's life, however, but heretical gospels. My investigation of the writings of Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, and several other fathers up to the year A. D. 400 has failed to turn up a single instance in which any of these writers referred to an *orthodox* writing outside of the New Testament as noninspired. If the Scriptures were the *only* writings the fathers considered to be inspired, one would expect them to say so, at least once in a while.

In short, during that period in which the New Testament was in the process of being collected and set apart from all

other writings produced by the Christian community, there is no evidence — the constant claims to the contrary notwithstanding — that the church *confirmed* inspiration to the Scriptures. The failure to use the idea of "noninspired" for things outside Scripture would lead one to ask whether the church had a concept of inspiration capable of being applied more widely than to the Scriptures alone. This suspicion finds ample confirmation when one sees the varied ways in which the early church saw the Spirit at work among them, inspiring their speaking and writing and living. The examples that follow of their application of inspiration terminology to phenomena outside Scripture could be greatly multiplied.

*B. Applications of Inspiration
Terminology to Phenomena Other than
Scriptures*

Clement of Rome, writing an epistle about A. D. 95, said of the Sacred Scriptures (in this case referring to the Old Testament) that they "are true, and given through the Holy Spirit" (1 Cl. 45.2). Several chapters later in the same epistle, he said in reference to his own writing, "You will give us joy and gladness if you are obedient to the things which we have written through the Holy Spirit" (1 Cl. 63.2). In other words, Clement described the inspiration of the Scripture and the inspiration of his own epistle in precisely the same words. But some people today are so accustomed to limiting the concept of inspiration to the production of the Scriptures that one modern author asks about Clement's words, "Did he believe that he too was inspired?" His answer is essentially negative, and he refers to Clem-

ent's remark as "the Bishop's unguarded comment," made before a technical vocabulary about inspiration was forged.¹⁰ The examples of this kind of language in Christian authors long after Clement's time, however, make this verdict untenable.

Origen spoke about the inspiration of the Scriptures more than any other early Christian writer. The point he most frequently made when speaking of the inspiration of the Scriptures was that, since they are inspired, they possess a deep meaning, a spiritual meaning beyond the mere surface meaning of the words. He also asserted that this deeper spiritual meaning was available only to those who possessed the grace of the Holy Spirit to interpret the Scriptures. He summarized his idea this way in *De principiis*, preface 8:

Then indeed [it is taught] that the scriptures have been composed through the Spirit of God and that they do not have only that meaning which is obvious but also another which is hidden from the majority. . . . [This spiritual meaning] is not known by all but by those alone on whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is conferred in the word of wisdom and knowledge.

Origen held that the Holy Spirit not only inspired the authors of Scripture but also its interpreters. In analyzing Origen's perspective, Henri de Lubac writes of "a double inspiration; the first, for the human authors; the second, analogous, for the readers and interpreters."¹¹ In 1 Cor. 2:13

St. Paul says: "We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit." This passage is frequently used in order to argue that New Testament writers claim for themselves the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus it is interesting that when Origen was describing the kind of help that a Christian interpreter of Scripture needed and received to interpret divine truth, he sometimes applied these same words to the interpreter: "We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit" (for example, *De princ.* 4.2.3). While Origen said a great deal about the inspiration of the Scriptures, he also understood the Holy Spirit to be inspiring him and other interpreters of the Scriptures.

In the writings of Eusebius there is preserved a sermon attributed to the emperor Constantine. Whether Constantine is actually the author of this sermon is not clear, but whoever the preacher was, it is clear that he did not regard inspiration to be confined only to the Scriptures. He began his sermon with the prayer:

May the mighty inspiration of the Father and of his Son . . . be with me in speaking these things, which it might grant in phrase and thought. (*Orat. Const.* 2)

2 Tim. 3:16 says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." Even the unusual Greek word used here for "given by inspiration of God," the word *theopneustos*, was used by some writers of the early church to describe the Spirit's activity long after the last New Testament writing was finished. For instance, in the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa referred to his brother Basil's commentary on the first six days of creation as an "exposition given by inspiration of God (*theopneuston*) . . .

¹⁰ Bruce Shelley, *By What Authority* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), p. 33.

¹¹ *Histoire et esprit* (Paris: Aubier, 1950), p. 315.

[admired] no less than the words composed by Moses himself." In fact, he went on to say that the relationship of Moses' work on the first six days and Basil's on the same subject was such that Basil's work might be said to surpass Moses' work in magnitude, beauty, complexity, and form. The same word, *theopneustos*, was used in a synodical epistle from the Council of Ephesus, describing the council's condemnation of Nestorius as a "decision given by inspiration of God." The presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit at the councils of the church was a widespread conviction. In fact, an interesting legend arose that the Holy Spirit personally took part in the proceedings at the Council of Nicea. There were 318 participants at the council, but as each decision was voted on, 319 votes were counted; the extra vote was believed to be that cast by the Holy Spirit Himself.

Examples of the early church's variegated views of inspiration could be multiplied, but in summary we can say that the early church saw the inspiration of the Scriptures as one aspect of a much broader activity of inspiration in the church. Inspiration was attributed to bishops, monks, martyrs, councils, interpreters of Scripture, various prophetic gifts, and to many other aspects of the church's life.

Thus the two statements at the beginning of the article (Scripture is inspired; Non-Scripture is noninspired) have proved to be inadequate descriptions of the position of the fathers, who would have denied the second of the two statements. Their view could be pictured more adequately with three statements: (1) Scripture is inspired; (2) the Christian community is inspired as it bears living

witness to Jesus Christ; (3) heresy is non-inspired, because it is contrary to the living witness to Jesus Christ.

The Christian community of the first centuries saw itself to be living under the ongoing inspiration of the Holy Spirit who was poured out at Pentecost. It took seriously the promise given in the 16th chapter of the Gospel of John: "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth." That community did not believe that the canonization of the Scriptures had cancelled that promise. Early Christians had no trouble believing that the New Testament documents were given by inspiration of God. After all, they knew that such documents emerged from their own life of Spirit-directed confession to Jesus Christ, and they knew themselves to be an inspired community.

II. TENTATIVE CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

What has been presented up to this point is a historical survey of the attitude of the writers of the early church on the relation between inspiration and canonicity. What follows, both more briefly and more tentatively, is a presentation of possible contemporary applications.

One could, of course, say that the perspective of the fathers is no longer a helpful one. They may have believed that the concept of inspiration applied not only to the Scriptures but also to many other aspects of the church's life. In the light of later insights or recent tendencies toward various errors, however, such a position would no longer be tenable.

One objection to perpetuating the fathers' perspective today might go something like this. The fathers' view would

lead us to say that a pastor's sermon or Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" are just as inspired as one of Paul's letters from a Roman jail. And that would surely downgrade the *uniqueness* of the Scriptures, which are for us Lutherans "the only rule and norm of faith and of practice."¹²

But to say that the Scriptures are not the only Christian documents given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would downgrade them or challenge their uniqueness only if it were in fact their inspiration that made them unique. The fathers would have denied that the Scriptures were the only inspired documents, yet the fathers surely saw the Scriptures as unique. Otherwise the whole concept of canonicity itself would be meaningless.¹³

A second objection to regarding the church's witness to Jesus Christ today as inspired by the Holy Spirit might be that there are many *conflicting* voices in the church today. How could we know amidst all sorts of contemporary witnesses claiming to be inspired by the Holy Spirit who was speaking by the Spirit and who was not?

This objection really raises an important problem for anyone who seriously seeks to know what God's will for today is. But it needs to be stressed that that problem exists just as much for those who would confine the concept of inspiration

to the Scriptures as for those who wish also to use it for contemporary witness to Jesus Christ. For whether one calls Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" inspired or not, it still presents itself as a prophetic witness from God, and thus one needs to "test the spirits to see whether they are of God." It is here that the normative character of God's gracious actions in Jesus Christ, and of the apostolic witness to these actions, becomes important. One must ask whether King's letter or any other message today that claims to be a word from God conforms to what we know of God's intentions toward people and His will for people's lives as these are revealed in Jesus Christ and witnessed to by the apostolic testimony.

There may be many other objections to speaking of the church's contemporary witness to Jesus Christ as given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but I find that the advantages of such an approach far outweigh its liabilities.

To see the inspiration of the Scriptures as only one facet of the inspiration of the community is to recognize how dangerous it is to separate the Scriptures from the community in any ultimate way. An example of this point is our current understanding of the origin and nature of the gospels. We are seeing with increasing clarity today that the accounts about Jesus' words and activities as they are contained in the four gospels in the New Testament are in themselves the products of a long development. These accounts are the products of the use of these stories by the church for preaching, worship, instruction, and so on. In the process of their oral use in the community prior to the composition of the gospels, these materials were

¹² See the Constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Article II, and the Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm, in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 464 f.

¹³ For a brief discussion of the basis for the uniqueness of the New Testament Scriptures, see note 3 above.

modified, reinterpreted, and rephrased many times.

If Scripture alone were inspired, then we would have the strange situation in which a saying of Jesus was used and rephrased and modified for many years in the oral tradition, but only as Mark or Matthew took this tradition and either used it as it was or further modified it would inspiration take over. This is both a strange and an unnecessary view. If we take seriously the thinking of the early church about inspiration, we see that the Holy Spirit was at work not only in Mark's writing but also in that process by which the Christians before him, many of them no longer known to us by name, received, reinterpreted, and handed on these words. The Holy Spirit directed and blessed the community's witness to Jesus Christ. This includes both that part of that witness which now forms our New Testament and those parts that both preceded and followed the composition of the New Testament books.

That the Scriptures are not to be separated from the community is an assertion not only about their origin but also about their interpretation. The Spirit who in-

spired the Scriptures has also through the centuries inspired the people of God to understand, appropriate, and live by that apostolic witness.

Finally, to appropriate the fathers' perspective on inspiration is not only to see how fully the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ is part of the total life of the early church but also to see that the Holy Spirit's inspiration empowers today's witness. Whatever may or may not be the merit of the idea that the Holy Spirit ceased in Israel with the last of the prophets, He did not cease in the church with the last of the apostles. The church today is called on to address issues of contemporary life with the Word of God. Amid the complexities of modern life, the church will not say "Thus says the Lord" lightly. But it will also not hesitate to say it, at appropriate times and in appropriate ways, on the authority of God's present and active Spirit. Christ's community also in our time bears inspired testimony to Jesus Christ, for it receives, reinterprets, and passes on the living word of the Spirit, who never stops leading into all the truth.

St. Louis, Mo.