

The New Testament Canon In The Lutheran Dogmaticians

J. A. O. PREUS

OUR purpose is to study the teachings of the Lutheran dogmaticians in the period of orthodoxy in regard to the Canon of the New Testament, specifically their criteria of canonicity. In order to see the dogmaticians in their historical setting, we shall first seek an overview of the teachings of Renaissance Catholicism, Luther, and Reformed regarding Canon. Second, we shall consider the early dogmaticians of Lutheranism who wrote on the background of the Council of Trent. Third, we shall consider the later Lutheran dogmaticians to see the direction in which the subject finally developed.

1. THE BACKGROUND

In 397 A. D. the Third Council of Carthage bore witness to the Canon of the New Testament as we know it today. Augustine was present, and acquiesced, although we know from his writings (e.g. *De Doctrina Christiana* II. 12) that he made a distinction between antilegomena and homolegomena. The Council was held during the period of Jerome's greatest activity, and his use and general recommendation of the 27 New Testament books insured their acceptance and recognition throughout the Western Church from this time on. Jerome, however, also, it must be noted, had 'his doubts about the antilegomena. With the exception of the inclusion and later exclusion of the spurious Epistle to the Laodiceans in certain Western Bibles during the Middle Ages, the matter of New Testament Canon was settled from Carthage III until the Renaissance.

The Renaissance began within Roman Catholicism. Spain had an early flowering of humanism until it was cut off by the Inquisition which was introduced during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella. During this period of intellectual activity in Spain, Cardinal Ximenes began in 1502 and completed in 1522 his famous Complutensian Polyglot Bible, in which he distinguishes between the canonical and apocryphal books in the Old Testament, noting that the latter were not in Hebrew and hence lacked an essential element of canonicity. Erasmus, who published the first edition of his Greek

New Testament in 1516, dedicated to Pope Leo X, also raises the issue of the authorship of Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation, and quotes Jerome as his authority. Erasmus was censured by the Sorbonne in 1526 in a statement which said, "Though formerly some have doubted about the authors of particular books, yet after the church has received them for universal use under the names of certain authors and has approved them with this definition, it is not right for a Christian to doubt the fact or call it into question." ¹ But Erasmus' influence spread in both Roman and Protestant circles. Among the Romanists who shared these opinions was Cardinal Cajetan, the opponent of Luther at Augsburg in 1518. Cajetan in his *Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament*, published in 1532 and dedicated to Pope Clement VII, asserts "The whole Latin Church owes very much to St. Jerome . . . on account of his separation of the canonical from the uncanonical books."² He also says in regard to Hebrews, citing Jerome again as his authority, "As the author of this epistle is doubtful in the opinion of Jerome, the epistle is also rendered doubtful, since unless it is Paul's it is not clear that it is canonical."³ Cajetan died uncensured, but Catharinus, a participant in the Council of Trent, later bitterly attacked him.

Thus, when Luther in 1522 published his German New Testament with its much-quoted strictures on Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation, he was re-echoing some rather common, though new, thinking of the period. In other words, if Trent had not condemned Luther, his views perhaps would have gone largely unnoticed. Luther rejected these books partly on the basis of historical precedent and partly on the basis of his own rather subjective criterion of canonicity, namely, their seeming lack of witness to Christ. Luther never left the "gate of heaven" he had found when in Rom. 1,17 he discovered the meaning of the righteousness of God and that Christ was not a hateful judge but a loving Savior. This great experience changed his entire attitude toward the Bible. It made him love the Scripture; he found Christ on every page, but it gave him a certain subjectivity which opened him to a criticism which his followers were often at pains to excuse. It is noteworthy, however, that Luther accepted the position of the ancient church regarding the authenticity and authority of the **homologoumena**. He attacked some of the antilegomena, but apparently on slightly different grounds than the early church and his Roman **contempo-**

raries did. It is significant that his criterion of witness to Christ became a standard, though not sole criterion, among his followers, especially with regard to the Old Testament, even among those who did not share his strong views on the antilegomena.

In 1520 Andreas Karlstadt, at the time associated with Luther in Wittenberg, published a work entitled "On the Canonical Scriptures". In it he classified the books of the Bible into three categories : **1)** the Pentateuch and the four gospels, "the clearest luminaries of the whole divine truth;" **2)** the Old Testament prophets and the acknowledged epistles of the New Testament, namely, thirteen of Paul, one of Peter, one of John; and **3)** the Old Testament hagiographa and the seven New Testament antilegomena. He recognizes that the church collected and ratified the books, but grants men no power to give the Scripture its authority. He regards all of these books as above all others, "beyond all suspicion of **error**."⁴

The Reformed were less interested in the question of Canon than were the Lutherans. Zwingli seems to have said very little except that he did not regard Revelation as "a book of the **Bible**."⁵ Oecolampadius accepted the **27** books, but said, "we do not compare the Apocalypse, the Epistles of James, of Jude, and 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John with the **rest**."⁶ Calvin appears to have had virtually the same opinion, recognizing a difference but accepting all 27 books. Beza in 1564 in dedicating his edition of the Greek New Testament still recognizes the distinction between **homologoumena** and antilegomena, but he minimizes it.

Thus we can summarize the thinking of the early Reformation period on Canon as being a return to the more flexible position of the early church before Carthage III. The Renaissance with its restudy of antiquity, the increase of interest in Greek manuscripts, the influx of eastern thought, and the spirit of rebellion against the immediate past and **the** shackles of popery, all combined to produce in the Renaissance man, Luther, Calvin, and their early disciples, as well as those humanists who stayed with Rome, an attitude of independence and self-assertion which showed itself in their attitude toward Canon, as well as toward many other things.

Then came Trent. On April 8, 1546, less than two months after Luther died, "the sacred and holy ecumenical and general

Synod of Trent” pronounced the anathema on any and all who rejected the 39 canonical books of the Old Testament, the **Apocrypha** of the Old Testament, and the 27 books of the New Testament Canon. It also anathematized those who rejected the Latin Vulgate as the true and proper translation.

This decree was Rome’s answer to Luther. In their desire to condemn Luther and everything he said, the Roman prelates also condemned their own men, not only Erasmus, Cajetan, and Ximenes, but, as Chemnitz points out, also Eusebius, Origen, and Jerome. This, however, seemed not to bother Trent. It is noteworthy that the subject of Canon in Catholicism has been virtually a dead issue ever since this time.

II. THE EARLY PERIOD OF LUTHERAN ORTHODOXY

The Council of Trent produced not only a series of decrees, but it also created a group of devotees and opponents who spent the next several years evaluating the Council and its work. The chief opponent among the Lutherans was Martin Chemnitz, 1522-92, who in the years 1565 to 1573 produced what **Schmid** calls “the ablest defense of Protestantism ever published,” the *Examen Concilii Tridentini*. In his first Locus, on **Scripture**,⁸ Chemnitz attacks the decree of April 8, 1546, for making the Vulgate virtually the normative Bible, and **particularly** for arrogating to the Church the right to establish the Canon and grant authority to Scripture. Chemnitz shows that the Bible is sufficient and inspired, without the traditions of the Church and papal pronouncements. He shows the relationship between the two Testaments and points out that the entire Scripture testifies to Christ, thus following Luther. He **then** considers the books of the New Testament individually, as to their authors and origin, indicating that he considers it of great importance that the authors are known as men who were personal witnesses of the matters they relate. This brings him to the matter of Canon, which he introduces with three questions: 1) What does the term “canonical” mean, and “how does the name confirm what we have said regarding the authority, perfection and sufficiency of Scripture?” 2) “By whom and how has the Canon of Scripture been established, or from whence does Scripture have its authority?” and 3) “Which are the canonical and which the apocryphal books?” In answer to the first question

Chemnitz shows the derivation of the term and its use in the Fathers. **In** reply to the second he takes vehement exception to the Tridentine opinion that Scripture derives its authority from the Church. "The papists say that Scripture has that authority from the Church, which Pighius interprets to mean that in some degree the authority of the Church is superior to that of Scripture, since indeed the authority of the Church has imparted canonical authority to certain Scriptures, and especially to those which do not have it of themselves or from their authors. Others say that the authority of the Church is so far above Scripture that the Church could reject gospels by apostles, such as those written by Matthias, James, Bartholomew, Thomas, Philip, Peter, and Andrew; and again could impart canonical authority to those which were written by Mark and Luke, who were not apostles, but who Lindanus says had formerly been apostates, such as those who defected from Christ in the 6th chapter of John. There are those who do not fear to blaspheme the divinely inspired holy Scripture and say that if the church should withdraw its authority from Scripture, it would not have more value of itself than the fables of Aesop . . . Therefore, Scripture has its pre-eminent authority principally from this that it is divinely inspired, 2 Tim. 3, that is, that it came not by the will of men, but holy men of God spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, 2 Pet. I. In order that this whole necessary matter may be absolutely certain in the face of all deceptions, God chose certain definite men for writing and ornamented them with many miracles and divine testimonies, so that there would be no doubt that those things which they wrote were divinely inspired . . . And as the ancient church in the time of Moses, Joshua and the prophets, so also the primitive church in the time of the apostles, could testify of a certainty as to which Scriptures were divinely inspired, For she had known the authors whom God had commended to the church by special testimonies, for she had known which were those which had been written by them, and from those things which she had received by tradition orally from the apostles she could judge that those things which had been written were the same doctrine which the apostles handed down orally. Thus John 21. The witness of the apostles and the witness of the church were joined . . . Therefore, the Scripture has canonical authority principally from the Holy Spirit by whose impulse and inspiration it was produced, Sec-

only, from the writers to **whom** God Himself showed definite and special testimonies of the truth, Afterward, it has authority from the primitive church, as from a witness in whose time those **things** were written and approved.”

Chemnitz goes on to indicate that the Canon of the **Old Testament** can be determined by the usage of the Old Testament in the New Testament. The establishment of the New Testament Canon he describes as follows, “John saw the writings of the three evangelists and approved them. Paul signed his epistles with his special signature; Peter saw them and commended them to the church. John added to his **OWN** writings the testimony both **of** himself and of the church. For nothing other than apostolic authority is required that in the New Testament it be proved that a certain writing is canonical or divinely **inspired**.”¹⁰ He quotes from Jerome the story of the deacon who was deposed for having forged the story of Paul and Thecla. The presence of the **non**-apostolically written Mark and Luke he explains by quoting Augustine who says, “Authority was granted to certain men who followed the first apostles not only to preach, but also to write.” Again he quotes Augustine, “They wrote in the period when they had opportunity of being approved by the apostles themselves who were still alive.” Chemnitz continues by citing Eusebius’ three ranks of writings : “. . . the first of these are those which are neither fraudulent nor doubtful, which have uncontradicted testimony and are legitimate, universal, and sure according to the confession of all the churches. He makes a second order of those writings about which there had been doubt as to whether they had actually been written and published by those apostles whose names and title they bear, writings which have been spoken against by **the** conflicting witness of the primitive church, but which have been used and read by many churchmen, as not unuseful. And as those of the first rank have been called canonical and catholic, so those of the second rank are called hagiographa, ecclesiastical, and by Jerome apocryphal. And **yet** so accurate a distinction has been made with such salutary care, that the Canon might be sure and the rule of faith or doctrine certain in the church, so that they, as Cyprian says, might know from what fountains of the word of God they must fill **their** cups. Regarding **the** apocryphal or ecclesiastical books of the second rank, Jerome says, ‘The church reads these for the edification of the people, but not to confirm the authority of church doctrines.’

Again, 'Their authority is regarded as less suitable for **settling** matters which come into controversy.' "11

Chemnitz sums up his argument as follows, "Now the. question is : 1) whether the church which succeeded that primitive and most ancient church or the church of the present can make authentic those writings which in this way have been rejected and disapproved, And manifestly it cannot. 2) whether the church can reject and disapprove those writings which have sure and certain testimony as to their authorship from the witness of the first church. And I do not think anyone would say this. 3) Thus the third question is whether those writings concerning which the ancient church was in doubt because of the objections of some, yea because the testimonies of the primitive church do not agree about them, whether, I say, the present church can make those writings canonical, universal and equal to those of the first rank? The papists not only argue that they can do this, but in fact have taken this authority, completely disregarding the necessary distinction of the primitive and ancient church between canonical books and apocryphal or ecclesiastical books. But it is absolutely plain from what has been said that the church in no way has that authority, for by the same reasoning it could either reject canonical books or canonize adulterated ones. For this whole matter, as we have said, depends upon sure testimonies of the church which existed in the time of the apostles, and when it had been accepted, the immediately succeeding church preserved it by means of definite historical evidence which was worthy of credence. Therefore, when definite documentation of the primitive and ancient church cannot be supplied from the witness of the ancients who lived shortly after the time of the apostles, that those books about which there was controversy were without contradictions and doubt and were accepted as legitimate and certain and commended to the church, no human decree can alter the fact . . . Pighius replies that the **Church** has the authority that it can impart canonical authority to certain books which do not have it of themselves or from their authors. They could thus even impart that authority to Aesop's fables or the stories of **Lucian**. Not that I would want those controverted books to be compared with Aesop's fables (for with Cyprian and Jerome I attribute to them the honorable **position** which they always had in the ancient church) but for the sake of the logic of the matter, I want to show that in a dispute over the

books of Scripture, the Church does not have the power to make true books out of false ones, or false out of true, out of uncertain and dubious books certain, canonical and legitimate ones, without any documentation which is required for such a thing.”¹²

Chemnitz continues by giving the reasons why the antilegomena were doubted; namely, lack of evidence from the apostolic church that the books had been approved by the apostles and recommended to the church, and questions as to the identity of the authors. “Therefore,” he says, “the entire dispute depends upon this question, whether it is certain and undoubted that those books over which there is this controversy are divinely inspired Scripture, either published or approved by prophets and apostles who had the divine authority.”¹³

Chemnitz is the most voluminous of the early Lutherans in regard to the Canon. We should note that he is writing against the background of the Council of Trent. He points up a difference which would never be settled between the Lutherans and the Catholics, namely, the source of the authority of Scripture. He answers, as do all the dogmaticians after him, that Scripture derives its authority not from the Church but from itself. Thus Chemnitz once and for all settles the matter among the Lutherans as to the position of the Fathers and the Councils regarding the Canon. The church can bear witness to the Canon; but the Canon has its own authority and impresses itself upon the church. The church can ratify: it cannot legislate. Chemnitz is very careful. He avoids the extravagant language of Luther. He goes as far as he feels he can in endorsing the antilegomena. He sees no straw epistles. He avoids Luther’s use of only one criterion for canonicity, nor does he take refuge in the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*, something he never mentions. His main emphasis is on the witness of the early church. We might summarize Chemnitz’ criteria as being the inspiration of the book, apostolic authorship or apostolic commendation, and the witness of the early church. He retains enough of the spirit of Luther, Erasmus, and others so that he does not hesitate to reject the antilegomena as authoritative for doctrine; yet he represents a more cautious and judicious attitude than his predecessors, which makes it possible for Gerhard to quote him without one word of disapproval, while saying a great deal more than Chemnitz does. Incidentally, Chemnitz, both in his *Loci*

Theologici, his *Examen*, as well as in the Formula of Concord of which he was a major author, does not hesitate to quote the **antilegomena**, even to establish a doctrinal point.

While we have devoted a great deal of space to Chemnitz because he has written so much on this point, we should not neglect to point out that his views were essentially followed by other men of his period. Aegidius Hunnius, 1550-1603, a signer of the Formula, says in Thesis 119 of his *Tractatus de Sacrosancta Maiestate, Autoritate, Fide ac Certitudine Sacrae Scripturae*, published in 1591, "The Epistle to the Hebrews, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, the Epistles of James and Jude and the Apocalypse, are outside the Canon and are judged apocryphal." In Thesis 120 he continues, "The New Testament apocryphal writings were worth more in the opinion of the primitive church and were more approved than the **apocrypha** of the Old Testament." And in Thesis 121, "Indeed many fathers who placed certain books of the Old Testament outside the canon prohibit no New Testament book from the Canon but state that all are canonical. The Council of Laodicea did the same." In Thesis 122 he says, "We will not contend [*pugnabimus*] with anyone concerning the authority of the Epistle to the Hebrews, or 2 and 3 John, of 2 Peter, and of the Apocalypse." And finally he concludes in Thesis 126, "It must not be concealed, however, that there was also concerning these books, as Bellarmine himself confesses, doubt in the early church, for **this** reason **that** they do not supply sufficient documentation of approval to show that they came with certainty from the authors whose names they bear."¹⁴ Note the more conciliatory attitude here than even in Chemnitz.

Andreas Osiander the Younger, 1562-1617, is quoted by Gerhard, "There are certain books which are spoken against because there does not exist sufficient testimony of the early church concerning their authors such as the Epistles of James, Jude, etc. These are called the hagiagrapha. They are also called ecclesiastical. They do not have in themselves value for establishing **doctrine**."¹⁵

Jacob Heerbrand, 1521-1600, in his *Compendium*,¹⁶ published in 1573, substantially agrees with Chemnitz.

Another contemporary who has much the same position is Matthias Haffenreffer, 1561-1619, who distinguishes between

homologoumena and antilegomena. He says, "These apocryphal books, although they do not have canonical authority in judging of doctrine, yet because they make for instruction and edification, contain many things and can be read privately and publicly recited in the church with usefulness and profit. And if we compare the apocryphal books among themselves, both those in the New as well as in the Old Testament, we find that they have great authority, especially the Epistle to the Hebrews, because of its excellent commentary on the **Old Testament**, and the Apocalypse, because of its illustrious and full statements concerning the reign of Christ, and other matters, including the certainty of the outcome of His reign. These books excel the others in eminence." Note that he distinguishes among the antilegomena as to value. Here is further development.

However, not all of **Chemnitz'** contemporaries said exactly what he did. The "**Magdeburg Centuries**" of 1562 says, "There were some writings spread through the church during this century in the name of apostles or their disciples, of which some for a while were not **generally** received because of the doubt of certain individuals, but afterwards they were received into the number of catholic writings, but certain others were rejected as **apocryphal**."¹⁸

And Leonard Hutter, 1563-1616, states, "It clearly can and ought to be determined that there is a difference between the apocryphal books of the Old Testament and those of the New, such indeed that the **apocrypha** of the New Testament possess much greater authority than the **Old Testament** ones, even indeed an authority which is valid for settling church doctrine, so that more **correctly** we can, yea we ought to call them authentic rather than **apocryphal**."¹⁹ Note now the authority to settle doctrine.

Conrad Dietrich, 1575-1639, in his famous *Institutiones Catecheticae* of 1613 says of **the** New Testament apocryphal books, "How does it happen that these are apocryphal? From this that in the primitive church they were not accepted by all as truly apostolic, but some churches were doubtful for a while regarding them and some plainly rejected them. But are they of the same value as the apocryphal books of the Old Testament? By **no means**, because the apocryphal books of the Old Testament were entirely uncertain and contained many things diametrically opposed to the canonical Scriptures and thus have no authority in **establishing**

doctrines of the faith. But the apocrypha of the New Testament were not so doubtful, nor do any of them directly oppose the canonical Scripture. And thus they also have authority in controversies regarding the faith. For although regarding them there had been doubt by some in the church, they were received by others, however, because of the doctrine of inspiration. There was doubt as to the author, but not as to the doctrine which was received as apostolic. However, the Romanists err because they say the apocrypha have absolutely equal authority with the canonical books both of the Old and New Testament in proving doctrines of the faith.”²⁰

And Balthasar Mentzer, 1565-1627, in the 1606 edition of his *Disputationes Theologicae* says, “But the ecclesiastical books of the New Testament . . . have almost obtained in our churches the same authority as the canonical Scriptures. Concerning this matter we do not think there should be strife [*digladiandum*] with anyone. Those of the Old Testament are inferior.”²¹ He then goes on to chide Trent and the Romanist Pistorius for removing all distinction between canonical and non-canonical books.

III. THE LATER PERIOD OF LUTHERAN ORTHODOXY

As time passed the position of Hutter, Dietrich, and Mentzer became the prevailing one among the Lutheran dogmatists. John Gerhard, 1582-1637, is often credited with producing this change, because in his *Loci Theologici* of 1622 he dwells on this subject more fully; but he was not the first, as we have noted above. Gerhard is apparently unaware or unwilling to admit any change in thinking on the subject among the Lutherans, for he quotes all his predecessors with approval, both Chemnitz and his followers as well as men such as Mentzer who say something different. As one possible motive for this minimizing of differences Gerhard gives a hint in his introduction to the section on New Testament Canon, “Up to this point we have discussed the canonical and apocryphal books of the Old Testament in general and individually, and it remains for us to consider the New Testament books where the first question of all is, whether among the books in the New Testament such a difference must be maintained that some are called canonical and others apocryphal. It seems at first glance that in this matter there are certain discrepancies among those who have seceded from the Roman Church, which the Papists

object to among us. But with the help of a distinction this matter can be reconciled, as we will shortly see.”²² He then proceeds to quote several statements from Chemnitz, Hunnius, Osiander, and Haffenreffer, all insisting upon a strict distinction between the **homologoumena** and the **antilegomena**. This he follows with a long quotation from Mentzer, “We accept the so-called New Testament ecclesiastical or apocryphal books in such a way that we permit them to be regarded as in the list of the canonical, and as far as it is possible to approve them we regard them as having equal authority with the rest. Nor have we added the expression ‘almost’ for any other reason than that in the primitive church some at times spoke against these books, since it could not be positively stated by whom they were written and published. Thus in this matter it could be easy for us to come to agreement with the moderate papists.”²³

Gerhard continues by quoting John Schroeder, who in a writing of **1605** adds a significant element to the discussion, “There have been noted certain books of the New Testament called apocryphal, but almost for no other reason than that there was doubt concerning **them**—not whether they were written by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, but whether they were published by the apostles by whom they had been signed. But because there was no doubt concerning the more important of their authors, namely, the Holy Ghost (but only concerning their writers or ministering authors), and because despite this doubtful authority of **these** books **certain** outstanding ancients of the church had raised them to a high level, they have obtained equal authority with the canonical books in the opinion of many people. Indeed, in order that a certain book be regarded as canonical, it is not necessarily required that there be agreement concerning the secondary author or writer. It is sufficient if there be agreement concerning the primary author or the dictator, who is the Holy Ghost; for the books of Judges, Ruth, and Esther are canonical, the authors of which, however, are **unknown**.”²⁴ Schroeder introduces the distinction between **the** primary and secondary authors, a concept which continues among the later orthodox teachers. Chemnitz and the older dogmaticians were oblivious of this distinction; though **Dietrich** had suggested that apostolic doctrine and inspiration assure the **canonicity** of books of uncertain authorship.

Gerhard concludes his study with three statements of his own:

“First, there is a great difference which must be established among the books which are contained in the biblical **codex** of the New Testament, for it is not right to deny that in the primitive church at one time certain of them were spoken against by certain men, as will **appear** from our consideration of the individual books. Second, these books which were spoken against by some are called, in a rather improper way, apocryphal, which we prove by a three-fold **line** of argument. 1) Not so much concerning their canonical authority as concerning the secondary authors of them was there doubt in the primitive church-but now these books, whose authors are unknown, are not properly called apocryphal. Otherwise it would follow that certain truly canonical books, such as the books of Judges, Ruth, Job, etc. are apocryphal, since their authors are unknown. 2) Because it was not doubted by all churches or learned men, but only by certain ones, concerning the authors of these books, There are two evident differences between the Old Testament apocrypha and these books which some call New Testament apocrypha. Concerning the former there was doubt as to their authority, concerning the latter there was doubt in the churches as to their authors. 3) Fathers who do not recognize **the** Old Testament apocrypha do not exclude any book from the New Testament Canon. Note the Council of Laodicea, canon 59; also Eusebius, Erasmus, Jerome. Third, for the sake of teaching, one must distinguish between canonical New Testament books of **the** first and second rank. Canonical books of the first rank are those of which neither the author nor the authority was ever doubted in the church, but by the common consent of all they have been regarded as canonical and as divine always, Such books are the Gospels of **Matthew**, Mark, Luke, etc. Canonical books of the second rank are those concerning whose author there was doubt by some at some time in the church. Such are Hebrews, James, **Jude**, 2 **Peter**, 2 and 3 **John**, and the **Apocalypse**.”²⁵

Gerhard continues with a very lengthy isagogical study of each of the 27 New Testament books, first the **homologoumena** and then the **antilegomena**. With regard to the latter, he asserts after a long discussion that Paul wrote Hebrews, thus giving it **full** apostolic authority. With regard to James he seeks to explain away Luther’s strictures against the book, even mentioning that after 1526 no edition of Luther’s Bible calls it a “straw epistle;” a contention with which Reu **disagrees**.²⁶ But Gerhard concludes

that James is apostolic and thus canonical. On 2 Peter is he very definite, quoting Luther to the same effect. His attitude is the **same** with regard to the other antilegomena. All are canonical and of apostolic authorship.

Gerhard marks a definite change in thinking among Lutherans on this subject. While some men before Gerhard, such as **Hutter** and **Schroeder**, had taken much the same position he did, because of **Gerhard's** great prestige as well as his **full** treatment of the matter, after his time the **dogmaticians**, while still paying **lip-service** to **Chemnitz**, for **all** practical purposes abolished the distinction between homologoumena and antilegomena. This is the state of affairs which continues to the present day. It is quite close to the position of the Romanists and the Reformed, Only at rare **intervals**, as in the case of Dr. **Walther** and Pastor **Roebbelin**, has the distinction been revived as a living theological factor.²¹ **Of** course, in saying the Lutherans have approached the Roman and Reformed position, we mean only that all three communions accept 27 books. The Lutherans have never made the Canon a matter of **conciliar** or confessional decision.

To complete the picture up to the end of the age of orthodoxy, we can cite a few more witnesses. John Andrew Quenstedt, 16 17-88, nephew of John Gerhard and father-in-law of Abraham Calov, voices virtually the same opinion as Gerhard, "We call those books of the New Testament protocanonical, or of the first rank, concerning whose authority and secondary authors there never was any doubt in the church; and those deuterocanonical, or of the second rank, concerning whose secondary authors (not their authority, however) there were at times doubts entertained by some. There was doubt, I say, and discussion concerning these books, yet not among all, merely among a few; not at all times, only occasionally. And these doubts did not have reference so much to their divine authority or primary author, the Holy Spirit, as to their secondary authors."²⁸ Quenstedt even says that knowledge of the secondary author is unimportant, "For even if Philip or Bartholomew had written that gospel which is read under the name of Matthew, it does not affect saving **faith**."²⁹ Note, however, that he does not go outside the ranks of the apostles in suggesting other authors. He held, as did all the dogmaticians, to apostolic authorship as a criterion of canonicity. Yet to know for certain the exact author of a book was not necessary. He adds, "For the authors of many

canonical books are unknown, such as, the author of the book of Joshua, of Ruth, Kings, Chronicles; however, it is well established concerning their inspiration and canonical authority.”³⁰

John William Baier, 1647-95, is somewhat stronger even than Quenstedt. He says of the antilegomena, “It cannot indeed be denied that some of the ancients did so doubt in regard to these writers as to refuse to them the authority that belongs to inspired books.”³¹ Again, “They are not ignored when we are asked for the rule of faith, but they have authority in such case by common consent at the present day among Christians, especially those of our confession.”³² He says in general of the antilegomena that “of their authors and thus of their divine origin there was once doubt on the part of some, but today no controversy remains.”³³ Note in all of these later men the absence of all reference to Luther and Chemnitz.

Abraham Calov, 1612-88, writing in 1684, sets forth his criteria of canonicity : “1) with reference to the *principium* it is required that a canonical book be inspired by the Holy Spirit; 2) with reference to the instrumental cause, that it be written by a prophet or an apostle; 3) with reference to the material, that it contain divine mysteries and not fables; 4) with reference to its internal form, that it be God-breathed; 5) with reference to its external form, that it be in Hebrew in the Old Testament and in Greek in the New; 6) with reference to its limits, that it possess the testimony of the church, either the Jewish or early Christian. Moreover you will note that these requisities are to be taken collectively.”³⁴ Calov represents a very interesting position. He enumerates every criterion of canonicity with the possible exception of Luther’s emphasis on Christological content; although he does require divine mysteries, which to a Lutheran imply the teaching of the gospel. And Calov significantly says that all of these criteria must be taken collectively. This is important.

David Hollaz, 1648-1713, is usually regarded as the last great representative of orthodoxy. Pietism had begun to make its appearance, and among other things the study of the Canon went into decline in this period. In fact, one might say that it had declined even by the time of Hollaz. He removes the distinction entirely between the two classes of books, saying, “Since at the present time all evangelical teachers assign divine authority to these

deuterocanonical books, there seems to be no occasion any longer for that **distinction.**"³⁵

Michael **Walther**, 1593-1662, even before Hollaz, after reading Chemnitz, Hunnius, Osiander, Gerhard, and others, sums up by saying, "If we compare what they wrote . . . it will appear that there is some difference of **opinion.**"³⁶ He **then** goes on to quote Gerhard almost verbatim. It seemed to cause him very little excitement.

As two final witnesses we shall depart from the dogmaticians and quote the New Testament scholar Buddeus and the historian Seckendorf.

John Francis Buddeus, 1667-1729, a glimmering light of orthodoxy in a pietistic world, writes in 1727, "in regard to the epistle which is attributed to James there was dispute as to the authority and author, and it is well known what the thinking and opinion of our own blessed Luther was regarding it. For being aroused by the heat of the controversy against the Catholics he plainly denied that this epistle had come from an apostle; he even called it a straw epistle in the preface of the first edition of his German Bible, and on this account he gave occasion to his adversaries to hurl various calumnies against him, from which among others Henry Maius has vindicated him and also Richard Simon. . . . But that this letter was written by James the Apostle has been placed beyond all doubt **today.**"³⁷

And Veit Ludwig Seckendorf, 1629-92, writing in the last year of his life, says, "Now, as Roman Catholics today have no doubts concerning the Epistle to the Hebrews , , . even so evil should not be thought of us, since we 'have given up the doubts of Luther concerning the Epistle of **James.**"³⁸

Within the Reformed Church the same process was in progress, but it went further. Westcott gives a very fine summary of this in his work on the New Testament Canon. He points out that in Zwingli's time no notice was taken of the limits of the Canon. In the first **Helvetic** Confession of 1536, the Geneva Catechism of 1545, published by Calvin, and the later **Helvetic** Confession of 1566 reference is made merely to the canonical Scriptures as "the Word of God, given by the Holy Spirit, and set forth by the Prophets and Apostles." The Belgic Confession of **1561-63** lists the 66 books, as the norm of faith. So does the

Westminster Confession of 1643 and the Swiss Declaration of 1675. Much the same occurred among the English Protestants." By 1700 throughout the Protestant church there was general agreement that the New Testament contains 27 canonical books of **virtually** equal authority and inspiration. This opinion has not been materially altered since.

In the history of the Missouri Synod, or of American Lutheranism for that matter, there seems to have been only one eruption of this question publicly. A certain Pastor Roebbelin of the Missouri Synod in the 1850's had doubts regarding the canonicity of Revelation. He was accused of false doctrine by another pastor of the Missouri Synod; but Dr. **Walther** in an article in *Lehre und Wehre* in 1856 defended Roebbelin's orthodoxy at the same time as he emphasized his own belief in the canonicity of Revelation. **Walther** quoted Luther, Chemnitz, and others of the early **dogmatists** in support of Roebbelin.⁴⁰ The matter seemed to end with this one statement.

To explain why the thinking of the orthodox Lutherans gradually changed regarding the value of the antilegomena is not easy to discover from their writings. But some reasons do appear. First, there would seem to be the intrinsic value of the books themselves. Even Luther and Chemnitz use Hebrews, Revelation, and 2 Peter constantly. Second, the history of the church ever since 397 favored the inclusion of these books in the Canon. Such a tradition is hard to break. Third, the quotations from Gerhard, Mentzer, Seckendorf, and Buddeus all indicate that the attacks of the **Romanists** against Luther's position on James in particular and the early Lutheran position on the antilegomena in general were unpleasant and embarrassing to the Lutherans. **Buddeus** is at pains to point out that Richard Simon, a Catholic, had tried to **vindicate** Luther on James.

IV. OBSERVATIONS

A few remarks on the criteria of canonicity are in place. A study of the foregoing material reveals that basically there are four criteria which appear in the thinking of the **dogmatists**: 1) content, 2) apostolic authorship or supervision, 3) the use of the **book** in the early history of the church, and 4) inspiration. The **dogmatists** all use these criteria, so that actually there is not **such a** great difference among them as would first appear. Luther **empha-**

sized content more than the other criteria and more than the **dogmaticians** did, yet he recognized apostolic authorship and the witness of the early church as factors. He certainly emphasized inspiration, and despite his strictures he used the **antilegomena**. We quote a few sentences from Luther's Christmas sermon on Web. 1.1-12, "This is a strong, forcible, noble epistle . . . The presumption that it was not written by Paul is **somewhat** plausible, because the style is unusually ornamental for him. Some are of the opinion it was written by Luke, others by **Apollos** . . . Certain it is, no epistle enforces the Scriptures **with greater** power than does this. **Hence** it is evident the author was an eminent apostolic individual, whoever **he** was . . . scarce any portion of the Bible more strongly enforces the deity of Christ . . ."41

Chemnitz perhaps more strongly than any other emphasized apostolic authorship, yet he adds inspiration as one of the prime criteria of canonicity. The quotations we have cited abundantly point to his insistence on the unbroken tradition of use and acceptance in **the** church. His urging that the antilegomena must be tested by the standards of the homologoumena shows the importance of doctrinal content in his thinking. He, like Luther, though rejecting the antilegomena, seems to make ample use of these works not only for purposes of edification, but **also** for doctrinal proof. In refuting **papistic** claims made on the basis of James **5** for extreme unction, and on the basis of Hebrews for purgatory, Chemnitz does not evade the argument by advancing the fact that these books are antilegomena and hence not suitable for proving doctrine. Rather he explains and interprets the **passages** under consideration to show that even on the basis of antilegomena books the **Romanists** have no grounds for their **ideas**.42 In contending against the Roman mass Chemnitz goes even further, quoting Hebrews 5, 7, 9, and **10** as his only Scripture proof, seemingly putting Hebrews on the same level with the homologoumena; for he uses the epistle to prove a point which is not nearly so clearly or easily proved elsewhere in **Scripture**.43 Chemnitz also uses **2 Peter** on different occasions. Thus all four criteria are present in Chemnitz. This applies also to the other early dogmaticians.

The later **dogmaticians** emphasized the criterion of inspiration more than **some** of the other criteria and more than did the **early** dogmaticians. **Yet** it was **by** no means their only **emphasis**. **Philippi** faults the later men for emphasizing the authorship of the Holy

Spirit, even of the antilegomena, so strongly that the **distinction** between the two classes of books made in the early church and revived by Luther and **Chemnitz** was largely forgotten.⁴⁴ While his charge is partly valid, in their defense it must be stated that they did not entirely drop the distinction, nor in emphasizing **inspiration** did they forget to insist on apostolic authorship and **Christo-centric** content as additional criteria. Further, Luther, **Chemnitz**, and even the early church fathers were never consistent themselves in the matter, as we have seen.

Thus, we may summarize by saying that the difference among the dogmaticians was not one of exclusiveness but of emphasis. They were all basically agreed as to what made a book canonical and as to which books were Scripture. It is significant that despite the difference in emphasis and approach, none of the **dogmaticians** ever takes issue **with** any of his fellow Lutherans on this point. We do not believe this was due either to indifference, or to fear of what the Romanists and Reformed might say, or to the reverence in which Luther and Chemnitz were held. The early Lutherans did not scruple to attack Melancthon, Flacius, **Osiander**, and quite a number of other notables within their communion, despite **the** fact that it brought criticism from their rivals. It appears that the consensus among them was that while some emphasized one aspect and some another, yet all spoke the truth. Chemnitz lays little stress on Luther's criterion of Christo-centricity, yet he never rejects it; Gerhard quotes Chemnitz' strong statements on apostolicity, yet points out that the antilegomena are also apostolic and worthy of at least a secondary position in **the** Canon. Calov, who seldom has been accused of mediating or compromising, **accepts** all the criteria of canonicity held by his predecessors: content, inspiration, apostolic authorship, and the witness and use in the early church, and says that they must all be considered together. Gerhard, while satisfied to accept as canonical a book whose author is unknown or uncertain, makes strenuous efforts to show that such books were written by apostles. No one can cite the dogmaticians in proof of a position that it is a matter of indifference as to who wrote the books of the Bible, or that such writings are not apostolic.

Further, all the dogmaticians seem to agree that authorship is not an article of faith. Chemnitz, who would come closest to this position, never says that it is. Gerhard, says, "Although it is an article of faith that all inspired Scripture . . . which contains

within itself revelations immediately inspired by God, is **divine and** canonical; however, it is not an article of faith, but an historical 'assertion, when the church bears witness concerning a particular book, that this or that book is the work of this or that author, e.g., that the gospel of Matthew is Matthew's, the Epistle to the Hebrews is Paul's." ⁴⁵ The Lutherans, holding that all doctrine must be drawn from God's Word, could not make the Canon an article of faith, since no such list is found in Scripture. **The** Catholics, teaching that the Church can establish doctrine, held that a decree, such as Trent's, made the Canon an article of **faith**. The Canon is the source of doctrines, but it is not itself an article of faith. The church in testifying to the Canon only recognizes God's Word; it does not establish it. Hunnius, who holds the same position that Chemnitz does on the importance of apostolic authorship, says, "That the Epistle to the Romans is of Paul, we have from the testimony of the primitive church, but that it is sacred, canonical and the rule of faith, this we have and receive not from the witness of the church but from internal **criteria**."⁴⁶ Quenstedt voices the same idea, "Faith, which considers the testimony of the primitive church which witnesses that these books have been written by apostles and evangelists, is a human and historic **faith**; but faith, which believes that this or that book is divine and canonical, or comes from the Holy Ghost, is divine faith, and this does not rest on the testimony of the church, but on the internal criteria of Holy Scripture and primarily on the testimony of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁷ In the same section Quenstedt emphasizes that content is important in determining canonicity.

It appears, therefore, that the position of the Lutheran **dogmaticians**, while differing in emphasis, indicates a likeness of **thought**. All agreed that the Canon was made up of books which were inspired, written by apostles, known and witnessed in the early church, and containing divine and evangelical teaching. It is important to note, too, that no dogmatician is satisfied to build his case on only one of these criteria. As Calov says, they must be taken collectively. No single one of these criteria is sufficient by itself to establish the canonicity of a book. Inspiration can not be **posited** of a book, regardless of its excellent contents, unless it is known from the witness of the early church that the book came from an **apostle** or one working under an apostle. Apostolic **authorship** cannot guarantee the acceptance of a book, as in the case of

the **Epistle** to the Laodiceans, unless there is the additional evidence that the book had strong testimony from the early church, and contained divine doctrine. Disputes about authorship disturbed the acceptance of Hebrews, **even** though its contents were generally well received; while disputes over content disturbed the acceptance of Revelation, even though its **Johannine** authorship previously had not been debated. The writings of the Apostolic Fathers **were** often rejected because of uncertain use, lack of apostolic authorship, and especially questionable content. Books which went under the name of apostles, such as many of the **Apocrypha**, were rejected on the basis of content, sometimes **because** of lack of witness from the early church or because of lack of wide acceptance in the early church. Thus it appears that **the** dogmaticians held a **principle** which is equally valid today, that these criteria must be taken collectively, and that canonicity cannot be proven solely on **the** basis of one of them. While it is axiomatic that only an inspired book is canonical and only a canonical book inspired, the **history** of **the** church has always demonstrated that it requires the presence of **other** criteria, such as the witness of the early church and the content of the books to establish the canonicity of a given book, No book can be regarded as inspired unless it is also regarded as canonical.

A critical reader of this material will rapidly discover that most of what has been said regarding the teachings of Luther and the dogmaticians can be refuted on the basis of cold logic. Even Calov's insistence on a collective use of the criteria can be refuted on the logical **premise** that several partially provable theses do not make one invincible argument. Each of these criteria has been and probably will continue to be attacked on one point or another. The criterion of inspiration falls before **the** stony unbelief of modern criticism and the demand for scientific proof. That Scripture is inspired cannot be proven scientifically; it is an article of faith, as our dogmaticians said it was. The criterion of apostolicity has also fallen before the shafts of liberal critics who in some cases have denied the apostolic authorship of nearly every book in the New Testament. It is certain **that** among the ranks of the endless and variegated isagogical theories the authorship of every single New Testament book has been denied. The witness of the early church is certainly subject today to a great deal of scrutiny which is highly subjective and equally negative. The criterion of the use of a book

in the church is also open to the criticism that certain apocryphal books have been used and dropped, others added for a time, and even different canons adopted in different ages and different churches. The internal evidence of the books themselves is helpful, as long as we deal with people who approach the Bible as God's Word. There should at least be no problem as to the apostolic authorship of those books which are signed, as is the case with Paul's epistles, and even some of the antilegomena. But unless we use a process of analogy, namely, that what applies to a signed book also applies to an unsigned one, we are forced in the case of unsigned books to fall back upon the second of the criteria, namely, the witness of the early church, which for very good reasons (reasons which while not on the level of Scripture itself, yet are much more cogent than the subjectivism of much of modern scholarship) assigned the books to particular writers. Yet when all is said and done, it appears that we are faced with a problem which perhaps, like most theological problems, defies a mathematical answer. The Lutheran dogmaticians liked to give answers which were as close to mathematically correct as they could make them; but a study of their writings on Canon reveal that they faced the same problem we do today. Except in their well-founded objections to Rome's arrogation of authority to establish the Canon, they were surprisingly undogmatic in regard to the canon. So was Luther. When one considers their absolutism in matters which were clearly stated in Scripture, and then compares their mildness and latitude with regard to Canon, we can only conclude that they felt themselves on ground which was not entirely doctrinal, but rather historical. And it was an incomplete and uncertain history.

Are we then in a state of darkness and confusion which makes us as theologians so unsure of our moorings that we are not quite sure whether God might also have revealed Himself to the pious of antiquity or to the contemplative among the Hindus and the virtuous among the Moslems? Much of modern theology today has arrived at this point, largely because men have given up Scripture as the authoritative and inerrant Word of God. Again our dogmaticians supply us with an answer. Scripture is *autopistos*. It is its own authority, needing neither the decrees of councils and popes, nor the scientifically documented witness of history, nor even the absolute proof regarding specific apostolic authorship to establish

its authority and value. The same Scriptures which convinced the early Christians that they were truly God-breathed books convince us of the same, if we approach them with the attitude which Christ requires of all those who will worship Him and be His disciples. Perhaps the Lord in His wisdom has dealt with the Canon in the same way as He did with the text. There is confusion, uncertainty, and a host of unanswered questions; yet the Scripture continues to accomplish its mighty acts among men. There is a peculiar combination of faith and history involved in the study of the Canon. We can be scientific and scholarly up to a point, but at that point faith must take over. Where faith is lacking, not only the Canon falls, but so does the Bible and ultimately the Christ to whom the Scripture testifies. Strict logic and adherence to probable historical data will go part of the way only. That is the reason that much modern scientific theology has failed. Liberalism has denied inspiration, rejected apostolic authorship, attacked the content, debunked the witness of the early church, and now finds itself with an historic term 'Canon' which it uses to describe a group of books for which it ultimately has no use. That was not the attitude of Luther or the dogmaticians. We hope it will never be ours.

In conclusion, we wish to make a few remarks about **the** *testimonium Spiritus Snncti internum*, since this question is often injected into the discussion. Further, it is closely related to what we have just said about Scripture as *autopistos*. The *testimonium internum* has been defined as "His supernatural work, by which through our reading and hearing of God's Word, He moves and enlightens our hearts to faith in His Word and promises."⁴⁸ According to Schmid, it is very doubtful that the dogmaticians apply this concept to the matter of authorship of Biblical books. He says, "Most of the theologians speak of the testimony of the Holy Spirit only when they are discussing the grounds upon which the authority of Scripture rests . . . for when it is asserted that **each** individual attains to divine assurance of the authority of Scripture only through the testimony of the Holy Spirit, this is still somewhat different from the assertion that the canonicity of each separate book must be proved in the case of each individual by the testimony of the Holy Spirit. And Chemnitz, further, does not mention, in **this** connection, this testimony of the Holy Spirit; but, in order to prove the canonicity of the separate books, points only to the testimony of the earliest Church, which could appeal to the **endorse-**

ment of the Apostles. And, finally, in all the investigations by the dogmaticians in regard to the canonicity of a single book, there is never any allusion to the testimony of the Holy Spirit . . . but they are all conducted upon the basis of historical evidence.“*”

The *testimonium internum* convinces us of the authority of Scripture, that the Scripture is *autopistos*. This point the dogmaticians raise in opposition to Rome's contention that Scripture derives authority from the Church. But, since the church does not give its authority to Scripture, it is equally certain that it does not compile or determine the Canon. A book is not canonical because of a church decree, but of itself, by virtue of its divine origin and inspiration. Gerhard says, “We believe the canonical Scriptures because they are the canonical Scriptures, that is, because they were brought about by God and written by the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We do not believe them because the church testifies concerning them . . . The canonical books are the source of our faith from which the church itself and its authority must be proved. A *principium* is believed on account of itself, not because of something else. A *principium* can be demonstrated *a posteriori*, but it cannot be proved by means of something older. In such a case it would not be a *principium*.”⁵⁰ Thus, while a book can convince us by the *testimonium internum* it is God's Word, and thus inspired and canonical, the Spirit, in the case of an unsigned or anonymous book, does not tell us of its authorship, which the dogmaticians establish solely on isagogical and historical principles.

Many of our problems and difficulties today regarding authorship and isagogical matters were unknown in the time of the dogmaticians, primarily because the entire church held strongly to the doctrine of verbal inspiration; but it seems likely that the dogmaticians would apply the principle of the *testimonium internum* to books which bear their author's signature, since then the author's name would be a part of the divinely inspired text. For example, it seems that the question of the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles would not be regarded merely as an historical one, but a matter of faith. Chemnitz makes a great deal of Paul's signing his second letter to the Thessalonians, and Gerhard, in attempting to establish the canonicity of Revelation and 2 Peter, always emphasizes the mention of the author's name in the text as evidence,

Perhaps our dogmaticians supply us with the best clue as to

what our attitude should be with regard to our present discussions on the Canon. Against the background of Trent they declare that neither history nor the church make a book canonical: yet neither history nor the thinking of the church can be disregarded. The dogmaticians teach us two things : 1) the Canon viewed as a list of books by a definitely known group of authors is not an article of faith; 2) we need have more of the dogmaticians' reverence for Scripture as the God-breathed, authoritative Word, which we recognize on the basis of its authorship, human and divine, its content, and the history of its use through the ages of the church.

FOOTNOTES

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