



# FACE . . .

## A Canon within the Canon? Yes: Proclaim Christ

MICHAEL ROGNESS

**A**lmost all Christians agree on the scriptural canon of the sixty-six books, some adding the Apocrypha. We read and interpret them differently from one another because we each read through our own lens. Those lenses are made of a whole constellation of factors—theological convictions; social, historical, economic circumstances; personal situations, etc. Reading through those lenses we consider some verses more important than others. That is, we all read the Bible with our “canon within the canon.”

“Canon within the canon” does not mean abridging or condensing the Bible, like Marcion chopping out the Old Testament and most of the New, or Thomas Jefferson taking his scissors to the Gospels. Rather the term acknowledges the fact that every reader of the Bible selects some passages as more important than others.

So what do Lutherans mean by a canon within the canon? The short answer is: Jesus Christ. We measure the books of the Bible first and foremost by how they relate to and proclaim the life and ministry of Jesus.

There are two sources for this. First is the Bible itself. The dominant theme of the apostles and early Christian preachers was to show that Jesus was truly the Messiah, fulfilling the promises of God in the Old Testament. In his Pentecost sermon Peter states that Jesus is the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy and David’s kingship (Acts 2:16–36). At Solomon’s Gate Peter told the listeners that the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and our ancestors had announced the Messiah’s coming “long ago through his holy prophets,” and that “all the prophets...predicted these days” (Acts 3:13–24). Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 is a review of Old Testament history to show Jesus as its fulfillment. In Acts 8:26–40 Philip showed the Ethiopian eunuch how Jesus was the fulfillment of Isa 53. Paul’s first sermon reviewed Old Testament history, stating that “we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus” (Acts 13:32–33). The entire Epistle to the Hebrews echoes this same theme.

The second reason for Lutherans seeing Jesus as a canon within the canon is the context of the Reformation. Martin Luther was well acquainted with the fanciful and speculative types of biblical interpretation in the first fifteen hundred years of Christian history—analogical, allegorical, typological, etc. He swept them aside for what he called the “plain reading” of the Bible, and for him that meant Jesus as the interpretive center: “All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them

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# TO FACE

## A Canon within the Canon? No: Proclaim the Whole Counsel of God

CAROL ANTABLIN MILES

**W**hat would happen if preachers and teachers resisted appealing to a canon within the canon and chose instead to engage fully the diversity of Christian Scripture? I can think of at least three positive implications:

First, resisting a canon within the canon obliges us to take seriously the possibility that the word of God emanates from both the mainstream and the margins of the canon. In other words, it presses us to focus not simply on a handful of theological themes (salvation history, kingdom of God, justification through faith alone) or literary genres (narrative, epistle), but on “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27 RSV), using a range of biblical texts.

Paul Ricoeur, for example, argues that it is both the referential and poetic function of Christian Scripture to “figure the sacred.” The way God is named, however,

is not simple but multiple. It is not a single tone, but polyphonic. The originary expressions of faith are complex forms of discourse as diverse as narratives, prophecies, laws, proverbs, prayers, hymns, liturgical formulas, and wisdom writings. As a whole, these forms of discourse name God. But they do so in various ways.<sup>1</sup>

For instance, God is named in the third person through the recounting of narrative. God is also named in the first person, both in the voice behind the voice of the prophet, and in the voice of ethical demand heard in the law. God is further named in the second person as God is addressed in the hymns and prayers of the Psalter. Finally, in the case of Wisdom literature, God is named not only in terms of God’s speech or activity, but also “in terms of God’s silence or absence.” The book of Job, in particular, discloses for the community the nature of divine eclipse and speaks of the boundary situations of human suffering and finitude.<sup>2</sup>

The naming of God continues in the various modes of discourse found in the New Testament. Narrative, parable, wisdom saying, sermon, prayer, epistle, creedal statement, and apocalyptic—each adds its own voice to the polyphonic witness to God in Scripture. Ricoeur points out that to privilege one mode of discourse (say, narrative) as the principal medium of divine revelation is to violate the built-in plurality of expression in the Bible. He concludes, therefore, that in order to treat contemporary congregations to the fullest-orbed presentation of God’s

<sup>1</sup>Paul Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 224.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 227.

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preach and inculcate [*treiben*] Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ.”\*

Luther candidly acknowledged Romans and Galatians as favorite books, not only because they centered on Jesus Christ, but also because they are very clear about justification by grace through faith, Luther’s own lens for reading the Scriptures.

Acknowledging Christ as the center and measure of the Scriptures—a canon within the canon—has benefits. First, we recognize that some verses are more important to us than others. I can say candidly that John 3:16 is more important to my faith than, say, Lev 3:16 (“All fat is the Lord’s”) or Num 3:16 (“So Moses enrolled them”), because John 3:16 tells me about Jesus. Second, it prevents us from spinning far-fetched theologies from a few verses, such as the fanciful end-time scenarios that routinely hit the bestseller lists every generation. Third, it frees us from a compulsion to explain verses that are puzzling. “Let the clear verses explain the obscure ones” is a good rule.

Of course there are precautions in operating with a canon within the canon. Jesus is not lurking behind every bush in the Old Testament. The Old Testament needs to be read in its own historical setting and perspective.

There is an even more serious precaution: We all read the Bible with a canon within the canon, but we should never be comfortable doing so. There is always the alluring danger of narrowing the Bible to what we want it to say. The Bible should always stretch us, jar us, and make us uncomfortable, because God’s plan is to remake us and the world into what we are not yet.

Still, in spite of its breadth, the center of the Bible is Jesus Christ. The Epistle to the Hebrews begins by setting the tone: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (vv. 1–2). Pay close attention to what God said to our ancestors and to the prophets, but the heart of it all is Jesus. ⊕

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\*Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 396.

reality, preachers must be willing to take up texts representing the full range of literary genres and theological voices comprising the biblical canon.

Second, the diversity of Scripture not only affords us a richer and more nuanced picture of God, it also honors and addresses the complex reality of the people of God. At a time when Christian communities are more diverse than ever before, the plurality of theological voices and perspectives in the Bible can be a valuable resource of renewal for the church. Pastors who face a multiplicity of congregational contexts, contingencies, and concerns will find resonances with their ministry in the diverse character of the biblical witness.

A third implication, as David Rhoads puts it: “The diversity in the canon undercuts the human tendency to claim absolute truth for any one Christian belief system. It...urges us to depend on each other for a full witness to the truth of God.”<sup>3</sup> The early faith communities did not silence dissenting voices or impose theological uniformity on the canon; this models an important principle and practice for churches and denominations that are today struggling to stay together in the face of theological disagreements.

Walter Brueggemann notes the importance of conflicting theological affirmations within the faith of ancient Israel. He argues that the “countertestimony” (typically rooted in the experience of God’s disfavor or absence) that disputes Israel’s primary witness to Yahweh’s gracious and steadfast love is “not an act of unfaith,” but “a characteristic way in which faith is practiced.”<sup>4</sup> The value of the countertestimony is that it makes the core testimony more credible. In other words, Israel does not mute its candor about its lived experience in order to protect Yahweh’s reputation and character. To do so would be to risk turning God into an “*absolute, absolutizing idol*, the very kind about which Moses aimed his protesting, deconstructive work at Sinai.”<sup>5</sup>

Brueggemann acknowledges that the witness of the Old Testament poses a challenge to Christian interpreters who tend toward resolving dialectics and harmonizing disputes among texts. He reminds us, however, that our faith tradition is not without resource. The tension in the gospel between Good Friday (countertestimony) and Easter (core testimony), between cross and resurrection, is never fully overcome. Our risen Lord appears to his disciples alive, but the scars remain in his ruined hands. As we in the church seek to be the body of Christ in the world, embracing this tension—and others like it within the canon of Scripture—is precisely what will keep us from proclaiming a gospel of our own making. ⊕

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<sup>3</sup>David M. Rhoads, *The Challenge of Diversity: The Witness of Paul and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 11.

<sup>4</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 318.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 332.