



The Canon: Open or Closed? Open: A Living Witness

MARY HINKLE SHORE

Is the canon open? Might certain parts of the Bible be withdrawn from the canon of Holy Scripture or other writings be added, and if so, on what basis? The concept of an open canon is not as far beyond Christian orthodoxy as it might sound at first. Both Martin Luther and Karl Barth made arguments that support such a position.

The development of the New Testament canon featured judgments about the (1) apostolicity, (2) catholicity, and adherence to the (3) rule of faith of texts that were (4) widely used by the church. Thus, four criteria became the basis on which to judge canonical status.¹ Could a writing be connected to the first generation of Jesus' followers? Did it have widespread acceptance across different parts of the church? Was its teaching in concert with emerging orthodoxy? Were people reading the text in worship and otherwise using it as Scripture? The four gospels as well as Paul's letters were quickly accepted, though different churches sometimes had slightly different lists of the letters. Other New Testament writings filled in around this center.

Luther's tweaking of the New Testament canon was the result of his judgment about the content of four writings. In his German translation of the New Testament, he reordered its books, placing Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the end of the volume. For the record, Luther did not remove any of the New Testament's twenty-seven books.² Yet one can see in his introductions to books of the New Testament, as well as in his ordering scheme, questions about the claims to apostolicity of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation and concern that these books were not in accord with the rule of faith, which, as Luther understood it, was defined by the gospel of God's justifying work for humanity in Jesus Christ. In arguments with those who would cite the authority of scriptural passages emphasizing

¹Harry Y. Gamble, "Canon, New Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1:857–858.

²Neither Luther nor later Lutheran confessional writings anywhere offer a list of the biblical canon. On this point, as well as the freedom of Lutherans to agree to a lectionary featuring first readings from the Old Testament Apocrypha, see the correspondence from Arthur Carl Piepkorn to John Reumann, published in *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1972) 449–453.

(continued on page 420)

The Canon: Open or Closed? Closed: A Historical Commitment

ERIC D. BARRETO

The sands of Egypt and the Dead Sea basin preserved documents for millennia that have in the last century reshaped how we construe Second Temple Judaism and the complex origins of the earliest forms of Christianity. The discoveries of the Nag Hammadi codices, the Dead Sea scrolls, and the papyri of Elephantine and Oxyrhynchus were truly groundbreaking finds that invite us to entertain a thought experiment.

Suppose that we were to discover an authentic letter of Paul, perhaps the missing first correspondence between him and the church in Corinth (1 Cor 5:9). If somehow we had indisputable evidence of this letter's authenticity, ought we welcome it into the canon? Putting aside for the moment the significant issue of how scholars would even begin to authenticate such a find, should we read it as Scripture alongside Romans or the Gospels in our liturgies, our preaching, and our personal devotions? In other words, does the canon remain open to new additions?

I answer no. Though it would be a boon for our understanding of the early church, I contend that such a new addition would not be a significant contribution to our common faith. Though it would be a boon for publishing houses, such a find would not necessitate new editions of the Bible. Though it would provide a long-lost glimpse into the work and thought of the apostle Paul, this hypothetical letter need not take a place in the common lectionary.

Initially, let's revisit this potentially elusive category of "canon." Here, I speak of canon narrowly as a circumscribed collection of texts that we treat as Scripture. These texts are thus essential sources for the work and theology of the church. As a Christian family, we together commit to the interpretation and application of these texts for the church's instruction, exhortation, and correction. For the church, the canon is authoritative as it defines those texts called Scripture that imbue our worship, inform our preaching, and inspire our personal and communal reflections.

My argument for a closed canon and, by illustration, my rejection of this hypothetical Pauline letter is primarily rooted in a simple observation. The canon not only delimits those books we call Scripture, it also provides a vital link to our forebears in the faith. Scripture links us to that great cloud of witnesses that went

(continued on page 421)

the importance of works for salvation, Luther advises that one should “simply reply as follows: ‘You are stressing the servant, that is, Scripture—and not all of it at that or even its more powerful part, but only a few passages concerning work. I leave this servant to you. I for my part stress the Lord, who is the King of Scripture.’”³

Karl Barth’s argument for an open canon was based on his observation that God’s revelation of God’s word within the Holy Scriptures is always known only as it has been received by fallible human beings. To the question, “What is Holy Scripture?” he says that there is a divine, infallible answer, “But the human hearing of this answer, whether that of the Church or our own to-day, is a human hearing, and therefore not outside the possibility of error, or incapable of being improved. This is true of our answers to the question of faith and order; it is also true of our answers to the question of the Canon.”⁴ Barth maintains an open canon, in theory, in order to differentiate the church’s flawed testimony to God’s revelation from that infallible revelation itself. Certainly, he respects the church’s testimony: “Until the Church itself is better instructed, we must expect to find Holy Scripture, Scripture as the witness of divine revelation, Scripture as the Word of God where the Church has found it in virtue of its own decision.”⁵ Yet he holds open the prospect of the church coming to be “better instructed,” and so refuses to regard the canon as closed.

Both of these arguments for an open canon offer benefits to the church. Luther calls on Christians to interact with the canon by valuing above all else the “one thing needful” (Luke 10:42). God’s work in Christ is the rule for measuring the authority of other revelation. This rule focuses one’s attention when reading Scripture. It could also be useful in current conversation about the value of noncanonical early Christian texts for believers. What, if anything, do these texts add to our knowledge of God’s work in Christ? Barth’s reminder of the fallible character of our reception of God’s revelation keeps us from confusing our judgments on these matters with God’s. The church has, by the grace of God, a collection of writings it has found over and over again to be faithful witnesses to God’s self-revelation. The exact configuration of this collection, like the ongoing interpretation of its contents, is best understood as open to God’s continuing involvement. ⊕

MARY HINKLE SHORE is associate professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

³Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963) 295.

⁴Karl Barth, “Scripture as the Word of God,” in *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1956–1963) 475–476.

⁵*Ibid.*, 479.

before us. When Augustine, Luther, Sor Juana, King, or Gutiérrez turned to Scripture, they shared a common core canon. To change the bounds of our canon might sever this common link to the traditions of our faith.

Despite my seemingly unswerving response, I cannot help but add some caveats. The canon exists due to the common assent of the faithful. It did not descend from the heavens fully formed nor did these texts come together by simple acclamation thanks to an uncontroversial agreement of early church leaders. The historical process leading to the canon was unquestionably messy, but this too is part of the church's shared commitment to it. The canon is a paradoxical legacy including both the shared choosing and treasuring of a certain set of texts as the word of God and the intricate negotiations that lie behind its formation.

A theological stance that holds to a closed canon does not suggest that God has ceased to speak, that there are no more words to add to the word of God. When I argue that the canon ought to remain closed, I do not mean that the interpretation of the canon has ended or that there are no other sources of inspiration, insight, and information available outside of the covers of our Bibles. Instead, God has and will continue to speak as we gather around Scripture, even and especially when we ask new questions of the text and discover new responses. Ultimately, the complications surrounding canon (including the existence of one or another "canon within the canon"; the disputed date of the setting of canonical boundaries; and the differences that exist between the Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox canons) mean that my "no" should be followed by a "but."

But forced to answer this question with a simple yes or no, I am compelled to answer in the negative—not because the battles over the canon have been pure exercises of innocent spiritual discernment but because the complex inheritance of the canon is a link across the generations of professing Christians. This is our common history as a people of faith. Under the same limitations of history and human frailty, we Christians have all turned to the same canon for answers. This link ought not be broken.

Ultimately, the canon, like so many other facets of our belief, is an article of faith. Holding to the canon entails the belief that somehow, in some way, these particular texts hold a special, sacred place in our worship and theological reflection much like they did for our spiritual forebears. The canon is closed not because God has spoken the final word centuries ago, but because we as Christians have together committed both to revel in and struggle with these texts throughout the generations. ⊕

ERIC D. BARRETO is assistant professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.