



Whose Canon?

Canon, by definition, is an in-house term, a term of identity—these are *our* books, *our* literature, *our* story, *our* family, where “our” includes not only present believers but those throughout the centuries who have read and heard read these books. Here is where we belong.

Trouble is, it has always been something of a messy belonging, and it’s becoming only more so. As we know, Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, and Protestants do not have identical canons, and it makes a difference in both our self-understanding and our everyday piety (no Apocrypha, for example, means no book of Tobit and, therefore, no guardian angels—or at least the loss of a major “proof text” for them).

More, even those who share the same canon have almost always functioned with some kind of “canon within the canon”; so differences inevitably arise—even church-dividing ones, which seems odd for folks who share so very much in common. Differences need not be destructive, of course; indeed, they can be healthy. As Lutheran theologian Helmut Thielicke noted some decades ago regarding the centuries-old differences among Lutherans and Calvinists about the relation between law and gospel, the differences, though significant, dare not be deemed church-dividing, since the Calvinists aren’t making this up: they have their texts, too—indeed, canonical ones!*

And now, even more “messiness”: the Christian family is being extended, especially in Africa, by millions of believers whose identity is less established by canon than by Spirit, and arguments that begin with, “But it says in Romans...,” don’t function quite the same way.

Such arguments don’t work with millions of Western mainline Christians either, that is, those for whom talk of “our” books makes only theoretical sense, since they have virtually no idea what those books actually say. Moreover, the whole notion of canon—scriptural and otherwise—is in danger of breaking down. Not long ago, there was a more or less agreed-upon “canon” of Western literature—a list of books, plays, and poems, works of fiction and philosophy, music and arts, science and history, that “all” educated people would have read or felt vaguely guilty about if they had not. This list marked Western culture and defined who “we” are. The list was admittedly Eurocentric, including in that description, oddly, the Bible. In Africa, I was surprised to hear critics of colonialism describe the Bible

*Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 201–204.

as a “Western book,” since, of course, in reality it stems from a culture much more like rural Africa than the urban West. What they meant was that the Bible had come to them through Western voices, European interpreters, American missionaries, and what they heard from these folks (many of them, at least) seemed to include an agenda alien to their traditions. But for those of us educated in the “great books,” whether in Europe or the United States, the Bible was always a part of edified conversation, along with Shakespeare and Sartre, Darwin and Dickens, Tolstoy and Twain, Calvin and Kierkegaard, Faulkner and Freud.

Those days seem to be past, for at least two major reasons: First, the sheer volume of stuff published in the old media, coupled with the explosion of new media, makes the notion of a group of “books” that would define the primary world of thought and culture seem first quaint and then quite impossible. Second, as we know, the old canon has been challenged by feminists, people of color, and other voices of appropriate suspicion who were never able to find themselves in the established literature—not to mention, of course, the rise of blogging and a pervasive popular culture, both of which work with altogether different norms and authorities (if any), and the new immigrants who bring with them other canons and other identities.

So much for an established cultural canon. But so much for biblical literacy as well, since, as noted, until relatively recently the Bible was included among the literature that all educated people were expected to know and that regularly showed up in public discourse and in art and literature of every kind. We didn’t have to tell people what “the sacrifice of Isaac” was about; everybody knew. But now: Isaac who? And, for that matter, what’s a sacrifice? Such questioners are not ignorant; they simply live in a different world.

And so do all of us, of course, like it or not—even those who still affirm an identity shaped by a biblical canon. But that means that we will have to come to terms with that new world in our preaching and worship, our teaching and evangelism, our understanding of church and society. Not by jettisoning the old—since then we would have nothing to offer and no identity to share—but by retelling the old in a new way or, better, by making new the old in ways that are as transforming for this generation as a true encounter with the gospel has been in every age. It may be harder now. There really do seem to be few norms, so those who want to talk of a “norming” canon and its encompassing metanarrative will have their work cut out for them. But it’s something we bring to the table, and it’s a Babette’s feast with wonders for all.

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