

THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

One of the many questions raised by Dan Brown's best-selling novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, concerns the formation of the New Testament—how it happened, who made the decisions, which books were left out and why. In other words, how did the early church settle the question of the New Testament 'canon'.¹

The Da Vinci Code puts forward its own thesis regarding the formation of the New Testament canon. According to the novel's in-house church historian, Leigh Teabing, it was the emperor Constantine who "commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made Him godlike" (p. 234). All this was supposedly done at the Council of Nicea (in 325AD), where Jesus' divinity was (apparently) established by a narrow vote and a decision made to destroy (so *The Da Vinci Code* tells us) the thousands of existing documents which chronicled Jesus' life as a mere mortal (p. 234).

What all this amounts to is a claim that Christianity (at least, as we know it) is a manufactured, fourth century invention, rather than a real first century phenomenon. In fact, this is exactly what *The Da Vinci Code* claims.² But as with most of the claims made in *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown has mixed a modicum of fact with a large amount of conspiratorial fantasy. Two examples should suffice to illustrate the point:

(i) First, it is certainly true that the rule of the emperor Constantine's was a major turning point in Christian history. His support of Christianity brought an end to centuries of persecution. However, whilst he did ask Eusebius (the bishop of Caesarea) to provide him with fifty collections of Christian Scriptures for use in his new capital, Constantinople, he played absolutely no role whatsoever in discussions about which books should and shouldn't be included in the New Testament.

(ii) Second, it is also true that the Council of Nicea did debate and affirm the divinity of Jesus. But this was in order to deal with the Arian heresy, which held that the Son of God, whilst pre-existing the world and being much more than a mere mortal, was not eternal and not divine. In other words, the purpose of the council of Nicea was not aimed at inventing a new form of Christianity, but at establishing and preserving the original, apostolic understanding of Jesus Christ. The question of what books belonged to the New Testament wasn't even discussed at the council.

What this goes to show (as numerous reviews and critiques have demonstrated) is that *The Da Vinci Code* cannot be trusted in any point of history that it affirms. That doesn't mean that it's wrong at absolutely every point (it does get the odd thing right),

¹ The Greek word *kanon* originally meant 'reed'. Because reeds were often used to measure things, it eventually came to have the meaning of 'measuring reed', and therefore 'rule' or 'standard' or 'norm'. As an application of this meaning, by the fourth century AD it had come to refer to the recognised list of inspired books, which constituted the Old and New Testaments. See D.A. Carson, D.J. Moo & L.L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Leicester: Apollos, 1992, p. 487.

² On p. 235, for example, the character Teabing states: 'almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false'.

but it does mean that if you want to know the truth about the things that *The Da Vinci Code* touches upon, you can't rely on *The Da Vinci Code* to give it to you. Dan Brown is a terrific story-teller, but an appallingly incompetent researcher.

However, our main purpose tonight is not to critique *The Da Vinci Code*, but the more positive one of answering the question raised not only by *The Da Vinci Code*, but by the very existence of the New Testament itself: How did we get this collection of documents? Now in order to get a handle on that question, I want us to ask three questions: (i) Why did the early church feel the need for a New Testament canon? (ii) What was the process which resulted in the closing of the canon? and (iii) How can we be certain that we have all the right books?

1. Why did the early church feel the need for a New Testament canon?

So let's come to our first question: Why did the early church feel the need for a canon of New Testament writings at all?

a) An instrument of Christian orthodoxy

It has often been suggested that the canon was essentially an instrument of an emerging Christian orthodoxy—ie. a kind of constitution for the universal church by which it could distinguish itself from various heretical groups. Given that by the beginning of the Second century the apostles were now all dead, an objective 'rule of faith' (*regula fidei*) was thought to be needed as a kind of 'defense mechanism' against various deviations from a united confession of Christian belief.

There is much truth in this suggestion, for there were several notable deviations from Christian orthodoxy in the Second century. Perhaps the best known is that which was led by Marcion (active by 140AD). In fact, Marcion was probably the first person to propose a canon of biblical books. However, Marcion's canon not only rejected the entire Old Testament but much of what is now included in the New Testament as well. The only books he retained were ten epistles of Paul and a highly edited version of Luke's Gospel.

But there were other significant movements, such as the one led by Montanus (active by 170AD) and another by Valentinus (ca. 100-175). The challenges of these movements also upped the pressure not only to clarify Christianity's core theological beliefs (as was done in some of the early creeds), but to identify its key documents.

b) The 'once for all' nature of redemption

This, then, is part of the reason why the early church felt compelled to settle the question of the New Testament canon. But it was not the whole of it. In fact, to view the formation of the New Testament canon solely through this lens (as many have done) is to miss the heart of the matter. Herman Ridderbos explains why:

Analysis of the history of the Canon in the Church ... contradicts the interpretation of the Canon as a product or a measure originated by the Church in the battle against Marcion and Montanism. Threats from these sources no doubt induced the Church to clearer reflection and to explicit statements in regard to what had been received in the Canon of the New Testament. But the Church has referred again and again to that which has been handed down by Christ and his apostles, and

the only way in which we can adequately judge the rightness or wrongness of the Church in this respect is to judge the validity of this presupposition.³

Ridderbos' point is that the drive to form the New Testament canon lies not so much in the circumstances of the early church, but in the history of salvation itself; ie. in the once for all work of Christ and the once for all witness that was borne to him by the apostles whom he appointed. In other words, from the very beginning Christianity was based on a definitive and authoritative message about and definitive and authoritative saviour who had accomplished a definitive and authoritative salvation.

Let me expand on this point for a moment. In the course of his ministry, Jesus made very plain that his own teaching was not only on a par with the word of God in the Old Testament, but both fulfilled and superseded that word (e.g. Matt. 5:17-48). He brought God's final word to humankind. The 'good news' not only of what Jesus said, but even more importantly of what he accomplished in this death and resurrection, was then handed on to the apostles whom Jesus both appointed and anointed so that they might preach it to the world and apply it to the life of the church.

The apostolic preaching of Christ, then, is the foundation on which the church has been and must continue to be built (Matt. 16:16; Eph. 2:20; Jude 20). It is "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), and therefore the 'true tradition' of the church (that which has been handed down directly from Christ through the apostles to us). We see this at the very beginning of the book of Acts where we're told that the first believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42).

The church, then, had and has a basic responsibility to "guard the good deposit" that has been entrusted to her (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14; 2:2); a responsibility which entails not only preaching the apostolic message, but preserving the written form of that message—ie. the apostolic Gospels and epistles. B.B. Warfield draws out the implications of this insight:

What needs emphasis at present about these facts is that they obviously are not evidences of a gradually-heightening estimate of the New Testament books, originally received on a lower level and just beginning to be tentatively accounted Scripture; they are conclusive evidences rather of the estimation of the New Testament books from the very beginning as Scripture, and of their attachment as Scripture to the other Scriptures already in hand. The early Christians did not, then, first form a rival "canon" of "new books" which came only gradually to be accounted as of equal divinity and authority with the "old books"; they received new book after new book from the apostolic circle, as equally "Scripture" with the old books, and added them one by one to the collection of old books as additional Scriptures, until at length the new books thus added were numerous enough to be looked upon as another section of the Scriptures.⁴

c) A natural complement to the Old Testament canon

Behind all of this, lay the fact of the Old Testament canon (which both Jesus and the apostles accepted) and the place of these Scriptures within early Christianity. The point is this: from its inception Christianity was structured (at least in part) by the authority of a closed canon of uniquely inspired writings (the Old Testament). Because of this fact, there was a 'canonical consciousness' in the church from the beginning.

³ H. Ridderbos, 'The Canon of the New Testament' in *Revelation and the Bible* [ed. C.F.H. Henry]. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958, p. 196.

⁴ B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (ed. S.S. Craig). Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948, p. 412.

However, the New Testament Christians also believed that Jesus (in both his words and his deeds) had fulfilled these very same Scriptures, and so ushered in a new and final phase of divine revelation. As the writer of Hebrews puts it:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2a).

Therefore, a second collection of canonical writings (containing the apostolic witness to Jesus' fulfilment of the Old Testament) was not only an appropriate development, but an inevitable one. On this point J.I. Packer comments as follows:

[T]he idea of a 'canon' (a set of authoritative Scriptures functioning as a rule of faith and life) was not a second-century invention. It had existed in Christendom from the first, since the Church took over the canonical Jewish Scriptures. And the expectation of a New Testament canon to supplement and complete the Old emerged naturally—indeed inevitably—from the original Christian understanding of Christianity. Christ had bound His Church to live under the authority of the Old Testament, in conjunction with His own teaching and that of the apostles (which was, after all, no more than His own teaching in its completed form). But if the new revelation was to become law for the Church alongside the old, it needed to be put into a permanent written form, as the old had been. And if God had caused His earlier, preliminary revelation to be written, then without doubt He would cause His final, crowning revelation to be recorded in writing. If the New Covenant was the completion and fulfilment of the Old, then it was natural to expect from the God who inspired an authoritative account of the one an authoritative account of the other ... The inner logic of Christianity thus required an apostolic New Testament as a God-given complement to the Old. The fact that the early Church felt this shows that it understood by what principle of authority it ought to live.⁵

d) The death of the apostles and the closure of the canon

It is clear from the writings of the apostles, that they were profoundly aware of the uniqueness of their ministry and the spiritual authority which Jesus had given them (e.g. 1 Thess. 4:1-2; John 4:6). This is why (for example) Paul could say to the Corinthians:

Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. (1 Cor. 14:36-38)

Given that the apostolic witness was unrepeatable and non-transferable, it is not surprising that the apostles gave instructions regarding the preservation and perpetuation of their teaching after their deaths (2 Tim. 1:14; 2:2; 4:6). For new Scripture would not go on being written after their life-time. Thus, as the apostles died-off and their oral witness ceased, their written witness became increasingly crucial and focal, and naturally became the exclusive, objective foundation on which the church would continue to be built.

We see this development begin in the New Testament itself, with the stress that is placed on the unique authority of the apostolic writings. We also see it end in the apostolic fathers (such as Polycarp, Ignatius and Clement) with their candid recognition of the theological distance between themselves and the apostles, evidenced in a clear understanding of the fact that whilst they too were writing letters to church, they were not writing Scripture. D.B. Knox plots this development as follows:

[B]y apostolic authority the apostolic letters were read along with the other Scriptures (1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3) and were to be regarded as the commandments of the Lord. It is not

⁵ J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Leicester: IVP, 1958, pp. 66-67

surprising therefore that they were included in the term Scriptures, as for example all Paul's letters are in 2 Peter 3:16 and Luke's gospel is in 1 Timothy 5:18. (There is no reason for excluding the New Testament Scriptures from 2 Timothy 3:16). The same identification is observable in the Apostolic Fathers. Polycarp (Chapter 11) united the Psalms and Ephesians: "In the sacred books ... as it is said in these Scriptures 'be ye angry and sin not' and 'let not the sun go down upon your wrath'". Similarly 2 Clement 2:4 after quoting a passage from Isaiah adds "again, another Scripture 'I came not to call the righteous but sinners'". Ignatius was conscious of a canon of New Testament Scriptures which he placed alongside the Old Testament (Philadd 5). He called these Scriptures the gospel and the apostles. Just as in the New Testament the title 'the law' is used for the whole of the Old Testament so 'the gospel' is used by Ignatius of the whole of the New Testament (Smyrn. 7), "Give heed to the prophets and especially to the Gospel". In the Testaments of the 12 Patriarchs (Benjamin 2), the Acts and Pauline epistles are included in the concept of Holy Scripture.⁶

It follows from all of this, that the natural complement to the apostles' intention for their own writings, was the early church's recognition of a New Testament canon (ie. a new body of divinely-inspired writings). In fact, in the final analysis Jesus himself must be seen as the architect of this process, not simply because he started but because he is the Lord of the church (who is present with us, walking among the lamp stands).

But this then raises the question of the nature of this process, and the infallibility of the results. In other words, the question is not whether there is (or should be) a New Testament canon, but how to determine its extent or its boundaries and (in particular) how decisions should be made regarding 'disputed books.'

2. What was the process which resulted in the closing of the canon?

a) Two important distinctions

As we come to our second question (What was the process which resulted in the closing of the canon?), we need to begin by noting two important distinctions that are often used in the literature on this subject:

(i) The first is that which is commonly made between 'canonicity' and 'canonisation'. The distinction is as follows: 'Canonicity' refers to a book's authoritative *status* (once it has been recognised). 'Canonisation' refers to the *process* which led to the recognition of the authoritative status of the book concerned. 'Canonicity' is the result; 'canonisation' the story of the journey.

(ii) The second distinction to note is between authority and canonicity. Authority is an *inherent, God-given, quality*. Canonicity is a *conferred, church-given, status*. The ground of a book's authority is its inspiration—that it is *theopneustos* ('God-breathed'). The ground of canonicity will include whatever factors contributed to the church's recognition of a particular book's authority. In short, the church can bestow canonicity upon a book (recognising it for what it is), but it cannot confer authority upon it (making it what it is)—only God can do that.

The importance of these distinctions becomes clear in the following quote from W.H. Griffith Thomas:

Canonicity ... created a book [ie. the Bible] not a revelation. Canonicity is analogous to codification, which implies the existence of laws already as separate books. The authority of each book of the Bible would have been the same even if there had been no collection and codification.

⁶ D.B. Knox, *Selected Works—Volume I: The Doctrine of God*. Sydney: Matthias Media, 2000, pp. 325-326.

So that the authority is not that of a book, but of a revelation; the revelation did not come to exist because of Canonicity, but the Canonicity because of the revelation, because it is held to be the embodiment of the historic manifestation of the Redeemer and His truth. It has been well said that the Bible is not an authorised collection of books, but a collection of authorised books. It is essential to remember that the quality which determines acceptance of a book is its possession of a Divine revelation. So that Canonicity did not raise a book to the position of Scripture, but recognised that it was already Scripture. Canonisation was a decision based on testimony, and the canonisation process was the recognition of an existing fact. It is, of course, true that the process of canonisation implies accumulative authority, and adds immensely to the strength of the position as representing the witness of the entire Church, but it must never be forgotten that the authority of each separate book was in it from the first.⁷

b) The ground(s) of canonicity

For the early church fathers, the primary ground or criterion of canonicity was apostolicity; a book's apostolic origin. This, however, did not mean that only books written directly by the apostles could be considered to be canonical, for this criterion also included books that were written by apostolic associates and thereby received apostolic sanction (eg., Mark's Gospel with its strong connection to Peter and Luke's Gospel with its strong connection to Paul). In other words, the category of apostolicity included both *apostolic authorship* and *apostolic authorisation*.⁸

What this meant, then, was that the ground of canonicity was not primarily a book's age or truthfulness (although these were not unimportant), but its connection to those uniquely qualified and authorised instruments of God's will, the apostles. Nevertheless (as F.F. Bruce has pointed out), antiquity (ie. a book's age), orthodoxy (ie. its conformity to rest of apostolic teaching) and catholicity (ie. its universal acceptance) did function as subsidiary criteria, for these were strong indicators of a book's apostolicity.⁹

c) The stages of New Testament Canonisation

In terms of the story or stages of the New Testament's canonisation, these may be outlined as follows:

1. A.D. 50-100: composing, writing
2. A.D. 100-200: collecting, using
3. A.D. 200-300: comparing, sifting
4. A.D. 300-400: completing, recognising

Within this process we note the following points: (i) First, by the middle of the 2nd century the four Gospels and the thirteen letters of Paul were universally regarded as possessing canonical status, and the two fundamental categories of 'Gospel' and 'Apostle' were thereby firmly established.¹⁰

(ii) Second, by the end of the 2nd century, Acts, 1 John and 1 Peter were firmly in place in both the Eastern and Western branches of the church, bringing the number of

⁷ W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, p. 108.

⁸ F.F. Bruce comments: 'Even at an early period, apostolic authorship in the direct sense was not insisted on, if some form of apostolic authority could be established.' See *The Canon of Scripture*, Downers Grove: IVP, 1988, p. 258.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 259-261.

¹⁰ D.W.B. Robinson, *Faith's Framework*. Sydney: Albatross, 1985, pp. 14-16.

New Testament canonical books to twenty. These books were known as the ‘*homologoumena*’.

(iii) The 7 disputed books—Hebrews, Revelation, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John and Jude—were known as the ‘*antilogoumena*’ (the disputed books). The status of these books continued to be debated for some time; some being more quickly received in the East (eg., Hebrews) and others more quickly in the West (eg., Revelation).

(iv) During this period various other ‘apocryphal’ writings were circulating—such as *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, etc. However, because these documents lacked any genuine apostolic connections, and many of them contained clear elements of gnostic teaching, they were fairly quickly ruled out of contention and regarded as ‘*notha*’—ie., as spurious.

(v) From c. 350-450AD, various bishops and councils made pronouncements on the New Testament books—eg., Athanasius’ 39th Paschal Letter of AD 367 names all twenty-seven books (including the ‘Apocalypse’—ie. the book of Revelation). The local western synods at Hippo (393) and Carthage (397, 419) affirm the same twenty-seven. In the East, full endorsement didn’t come until c. 500.

However, as Donald Robinson points out:

It is worth noting that the decision regarding the contents of the New Testament canon was reached not by a general council, but by wide practical consensus after a slow process of discovery, familiarity, usage, discussion and controversy. The spiritual or doctrinal value of a particular book—or its appropriateness for reading in public worship—was under consideration in various ways throughout the long process of the centuries. But, as a formal principle, apostolic authentication seems to have been what was sought by those who put their energies into determining a canon or measuring rod of ‘God-breathed scripture’.¹¹

3. How can we be certain that we have all the right books?

That brings us to our third question: How can we be certain that the decisions made by the early church fathers were correct? Do we have all the right books?

a) *The Roman Catholic position*

The Roman Catholic answer to this question is that it is the church which authorises the canon. Lest we misunderstand this position, Catholicism is not claiming that the church creates Scripture. The Canon *viewed in itself* possesses inherent authority. But *as it concerns us* the recognition of the Canon rests upon the authority of the church. In other words, the church is the ‘epistemological guarantor’ of Scriptural authority. Ridderbos describes this position in the following way:

The church as the supposed infallible doctrinal authority, guarantees for its members the authority of the Canon of Scripture. It is the Church that has established and fixed its borders. It is the Church also that stands behind the Canon and upon which the authority rests for the faith that this Canon is the Word of God.¹²

¹¹ Ibid, p. 19.

¹² H. Ridderbos, ‘The Canon of the New Testament’, in *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, ²1988, p. 190.

Despite its subtlety, this position is extremely dangerous, for it effectively transfers ‘infallibility’ from Scripture to the church, for (in practical terms) it sets up the church as the final arbiter of truth. However, the New Testament will not allow such a transfer, and history makes nonsense of such a claim. The church is built of the foundations of the prophets and apostles (Eph. 2:20), not the other way round. The church, therefore, can never be the master of Scripture, only its servant and witness. Moreover, because of the continuing frailty of the church, the New Testament stresses the fact that it must remain in humble submission to Scripture (1 Tim. 4:1-13), constantly being reformed by it.

So, whilst the church may have ‘canonised’ certain books, and bound these canonical books together in one volume, it didn’t create or authorise Scripture in any sense. As we’ve seen, the church simply recognised the canonical books for what they were; an act of recognition which was analogous to a child recognising its true parents—and, as Luther once said, “who begets his own parent?”, or “Who first brings forth his own maker?”

b) The Protestant Reformers’ position

Understanding these things, the Reformers refused to allow that the authority of the Canon was dependent on the church. Rather, they insisted, it was dependent upon the evidences of Scriptural books themselves and upon the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*). In other words, the authority of Scripture is self-authenticating. Calvin is worth quoting at some length:

It is utterly vain, then, to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent. Thus, while the church receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial. But because the church recognises Scripture to be the truth of its own God, as a pious duty it unhesitatingly venerates Scripture. As to their question—How can we be assured that this has sprung from God unless we have recourse to the decree of the church?—it is as if someone asked: When will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their colour, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.¹³

Therefore, illumined by his [ie. the Spirit’s] power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men.¹⁴

About a century later *The Westminster Confession of Faith* would speak similarly:

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the

¹³ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, VII, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, I, VII, 5

infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.¹⁵

c) The humble use of critical judgment

Nevertheless, such an insistence should not be used to deny the fact that the *recognition* of the extent of the canon (at least from one point of view) is a human judgment and therefore (potentially) fallible.¹⁶ This is so by nature of case; for Scripture is our only infallible authority and there is no verse of Scripture that tells us exactly what books should be included in the New Testament!

This, however, is not a cause for despair. But it does highlight the fact that we must bring to the question of the canon all the accumulated resources of human learning and thought—in particular historical and textual knowledge—and proceed in humility, fellowship and prayer. Within this process we can also fruitfully apply various historical and theological tests—as did the early church. For instance: [i] The test of apostolicity; [ii] the test of historical antiquity; [iii] the test of theological orthodoxy; [iv] the test of ‘catholicity’; [v] the test of traditional use, and so on.

In fact, the Reformers’ position would be misunderstood if it was thought to rule out this kind of critical engagement. For it was on the basis of the application of these kinds of tests that the Reformers judged the Jewish Apocryphal writings (which are still to be found in Catholic editions of the Old Testament) as non-Scriptural and so removed from Protestant editions of the Bible. It was for similar reasons that Luther raised questions about the letter of James, but was not (in the end) convinced that it should be removed from the New Testament canon.

d) The reality of providential sovereignty

In all of this we also need to confess that over the entire process, stands the Sovereign Lord himself—who rules and guides his people. Thus, it is not too much to assume that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures also testifies to his own inspiring work and superintends the process of its preservation, so that his word is not lost to the sheep of Christ. So Jim Packer maintains:

We should not hesitate to ascribe the process by which [the early church] sought and found a New Testament to the providential guidance of the Holy Ghost, nor to receive that New Testament as from the hand of Christ, as God-breathed Scripture, inspired and, together with the Old Testament, authoritative for faith and life.¹⁷

This is not to fall back into the Catholic error of granting infallibility to the church and its decisions, rather it is to honour and acknowledge the work of the Spirit in the church. Along these lines Donald Bloesch comments helpfully:

Scripture is a product of the inspiring work of the Spirit, who guided the writers to give a reliable testimony to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Its canonizing is to be attributed to the illumining work of the Spirit, who led the fathers of the church to assent to what the Spirit had already authorized.¹⁸

¹⁵ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), Chapter 1, paragraphs IV-V.

¹⁶ R.C. Sproul has (supposedly) called the Biblical canon, ‘A fallible collection of infallible books’.

¹⁷ J.I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, p. 67.

¹⁸ D.G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1994, p. 150.

Conclusion

The Da Vinci Code is right about one thing: “the Bible did not arrive by fax from heaven”. Rather, it has come into being as the result of an historical process, and has been gathered together as the result of an historical process. But this is hardly news, and certainly no secret! However, to only see this process as a human one would be a serious mistake. For there would have been no process, were it not for the fact that “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21) and in committing this Word to writing were so superintended by the same Holy Spirit that the end result was “God breathed” Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16).

Whilst we may not be able to claim the same degree of infallibility for the actions of the early church, it is consistent with both the character and promises of God to conclude that he has continually guided his people in the delimitation and preservation of these writings. Decisions about the precise boundaries of the canon of Scripture may not be able to be guaranteed with “absolute empirical certainty”, but they do (as David Dunbar suggests) fall into a category of “practical certainty” (on the basis of historical and theological considerations).¹⁹

Furthermore, the sheep of Christ also know the experience of spiritual and psychological certitude—for Jesus’ sheep hear his voice (John 10:27), and have repeatedly borne witness to such hearing in, and only in, the Scriptures which we have received. Thus, it is not at all unreasonable to agree with John Calvin’s claim that by the Spirit we may know beyond guesswork that in Scripture we hold the unassailable truth.²⁰

In light of this, the best place to direct an inquirer, who wants to know the truth about Jesus so that they may make an informed decision about Christianity, is to that collection of writings which we call the New Testament. For as Hilary of Poitiers once remarked: “He whom we can know only through his own utterances is a fitting witness concerning himself.”²¹

¹⁹ D.G. Dunbar, ‘The Biblical Canon’ in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (eds. D.A. Carson & J.D. Woodbridge). Leicester: IVP, 1986, p. 360.

²⁰ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, I, VII, 5.

²¹ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, I. xviii.