“I Have Questions about the Christian Canon”

I just read Don Closson’s article about the history of the Christian Canon and found it to be interesting and helpful. I have recently been looking deeper into my religion and other Christian religions to get a better understanding of the various beliefs. However, I have some questions.

Don mentions that the Church Fathers respected and quoted from works that have generally passed out of the Christian tradition. Why are these books no longer considered important? It’s almost as though there were some kind of stock market drop in the value of these writings. If certain writings were so important as to guide the early Christians in what was probably the most difficult time for the Church why do they not hold the same value today? Also, were any of the early teachings taken from the Apocrypha?

My other question is more of an observation. When you explain the process of determining the Canon of the NT after the Reformation you write, “As usual, the Catholic position rested upon the authority of the Church hierarchy itself.” Then you go on to say, “Instead of the authority of the Church, Luther and the reformers focused on the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.” To me this seems to be a very biased statement in an otherwise objective article. From what I understand, the Catholic Church also believes in the internal witness of the Holy Spirit working through its leaders. And since the NT of both Protestants and Catholics is the same (a surprising fact I just learned and which your article was a little misleading) would you not say it probably did inspire both groups?

Thanks for the thoughtful questions and observations. Let me try to respond to each issue you raise.

Why don't we read the writings of the Church Fathers today?

It appears that there has been an ebb and flow regarding the popularity of these writings among average believers. Protestants may have carried the notion of *Sola Scriptura* too far, fearing that spending too much time in the writings of the early church might lead to an unhealthy elevation of these works. However, there appears to be growth in both interest in, and appreciation for, the works of the early church among all Christians that might move us towards a better balance. I recently finished *Reading Scripture With The Church Fathers*, by Christopher Hall (an InterVarsity publication) and found that his admonition to delve into the writings of the early church an enticing one. Part of the problem is that many Christians do not read theological works of any type, much less serious works that are planted in a very different set of cultural challenges. Theological writing is done in response to the demands of pressing cultural questions and issues. The foreignness of the cultural milieu surrounding the early church can make reading the Church Fathers a considerable effort. I do see a trend, especially among the post-baby-boomer generations, towards desiring a deeper spiritual life, one that is often exhibited by the leaders of the early church. People are looking to that era for models of devotion and authentic community that are often lacking in our modern, and postmodern, society.

My bias against the Roman Catholic Church.

You are right, my statement is overly biased. I need to revisit that section of the essay and restate my views. I do not mean to say that the Catholic Church does not claim guidance from the Holy Spirit, but that they have depended more on the decisions of a centralized leadership (magisterium) in deciding on the canon rather than on actual use and acceptance by the universal church and individual believers. Thanks for pointing this out. If you don't mind I am going to paste into this response a portion of an essay

that I wrote on the Apocrypha that might help explain my view.

> *In a recent meeting of Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox theologians called the Rose Hill conference, evangelical theologian Harold O. J. Brown asks that we hold a dynamic view of this relationship between the church and the Bible. He notes that Catholics have argued "that the church—the Catholic Church—gave us the Bible and that church authority authenticates it." Protestants have responded with the view that "Scripture creates the church, which is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles." However, he admits that there is no way to make the New Testament older than the church. Does this leave us then bowing to church authority only? Brown doesn't think so. He writes, "[I]t is the work of the Spirit that makes the Scripture divinely authoritative and preserves them from error. In addition the Holy Spirit was active in the early congregations and councils, enabling them to recognize the right Scriptures as God's Word." He adds that even though the completed canon is younger than the church, it is not in captivity to the church. Instead, "it is the 'norm that norms' the church's teaching and life."*
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> *Many Catholics argue that the additional books found in the Apocrypha (Septuagint plus) which they call the deutero-canon, were universally held by the early church to be canonical. This is a considerable overstatement. However, Protestants have acted as if these books never existed or played any role whatsoever in the early church. This too is an extreme position. Although many of the early church fathers recognized a distinction between the Apocryphal books and inspired Scripture, they universally held them in high regard. Protestants who are serious students of their faith cannot ignore this material if they hope to understand the early church or the thinking of its earliest theologians.*
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> *On the issue of canonicity, of the Old Testament or the New, Norman Geisler lists the principles that outline the*

Protestant perspective. Put in the form of a series of questions he asks, "Was the book written by a spokesperson for God, who was confirmed by an act of God, who told the truth in the power of God, and was accepted by the people of God?" If these can be answered in the affirmative, especially the first question, the book was usually immediately recognized as inspired and included in the canon. The Old Testament Apocrypha lacks many of these characteristics. None of the books claim to be written by a prophet, and Maccabees specifically denies being prophetic. Others contain extensive factual errors. Most importantly, many in the early church including Melito of Sardis, Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Jerome rejected the canonicity of the Apocrypha, although retaining high regards for its devotional and inspirational value.

A final irony in this matter is the fact that even Cardinal Cajetan, who opposed Luther at Augsburg in 1518, published a Commentary on All the Authentic Historical Books of the Old Testament (1532) in which he did not include the Apocrypha.

Sincerely,

Don Closson

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