

A COMPANION TO WAYNE GRUEDEM'S SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

# HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE



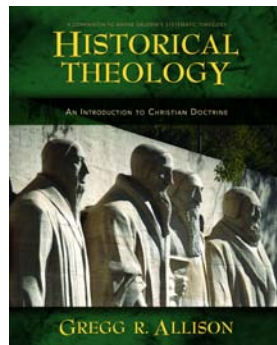
GREGG R. ALLISON

## Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine

A Companion to Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology

By: Gregg Allison

*Historical Theology* is a superb resource for those familiar with Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* or interested in understanding the development of Christian theology. In *Historical Theology*, Gregg Allison offers students the opportunity to study the historical development of theology according to a topical arrangement, setting out the history of Christian doctrine one theological element at a time. The text includes a generous mix of primary source material, and Allison's references will help readers continue their study of historical theology through Christian history's most important contributors.



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*This book is dedicated to my three children,  
whom God gave to my wife, Nora, and me—*

*Lauren Marie Schneringer,*

*Hanell Joy Schuetz,*

*and Luke Winford Allison*

*—three wonderful blessings in my life  
as I was writing this book.*

*As committed followers of Jesus Christ,  
you are heirs to the evangelical legacy  
described in the following pages,  
members of the great company of saints  
whose study of Scripture, careful thinking,  
fight against heresy, prayer,  
worship, perseverance in the truth,  
love for Christ, labor in the church,  
and yielding to the Holy Spirit*

*led to the development of the evangelical doctrines  
that you now embrace, and that embrace you.*

*May you follow the way of this truth throughout your life—  
until you go to be with Jesus, or he comes for his church—  
redeemed by the One who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”*

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# FOREWORD

This book is an amazingly rich resource that traces the development of thirty-two major doctrines from the time of the New Testament to writers in the present day. Every chapter provides a fascinating story that is hard to put down because it shows how God has worked in Christians' lives over the centuries to allow one heresy after another to challenge the church, then to raise up courageous, wise teachers and writers to respond to the wrong teaching with a new and deeper understanding of Scripture, resulting in even stronger faith in God and his Word. Therefore this book is the story of how the Holy Spirit has guided and protected the people of God over many centuries, and how he is still doing so today.

Christians tend to make two mistakes when thinking about church history. The first mistake is to *ignore it* or think it unimportant. This view forgets that the Holy Spirit has been working in the church throughout the centuries to gift “shepherds and teachers” (Eph. 4:11) so that they would guide and teach the church. Gregg Allison quotes extensively from these gifted teachers that God raised up in every generation and shows how we can still learn a great deal from them today.

The second mistake is to *idolize* church history, or at least some part of it. I have met Christians who seem to think that there was some golden age of doctrinal understanding long ago, and our task today should be simply to “get back” to that understanding of the past, such as the views of the early church Fathers, or the early creeds of the church, or Augustine, or Luther, or Calvin, or the Puritans, or Wesley. But this view can neglect the fact that our only perfect source of doctrine is the Bible itself, and no one in history has understood it perfectly. Rather, Christ has been working in the church throughout the centuries to “sanctify” it, so that at the end “he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:26–27). The history that this book traces is a history of the Christian church gradually growing in understanding, making progress toward the goal that we “may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine,” but by “speaking the truth in love” we may “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:14–15).

Gregg Allison is one of the wisest, most articulate, and most knowledgeable theologians in the church today, and this is evident throughout this book. He is also a humble, godly man whose life adorns (Titus 2:10) the doctrine he teaches, and it is my privilege to count him as a friend. I am grateful that he wrote this book to be used alongside my *Systematic Theology* (as a supplement and sometimes a needed corrective to my brief historical summaries), and I am sure that his book will also find wide usefulness as a resource by itself. It is a privilege for me to commend this wonderful book for the strengthening of the church throughout the world.

Wayne Grudem, Ph.D.

Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies  
Phoenix Seminary, Phoenix, Arizona, USA

# PREFACE

This book is intended to be a companion volume to Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 2000). Indeed, it was Wayne who called me one day with a proposal and a purpose: to write a book that would trace the development of the doctrines that his book covers, to help Christians understand how they have come to have the beliefs they have today. I did not realize at the time how daunting a task this project would be; at times I have been overwhelmed by the sense that no one person should have undertaken to accomplish it. Now, over a dozen years later, I am thankful to God (and Wayne) that I can present this book to you. Although it is a companion volume, my *Historical Theology* can be read on its own. Still, to receive the maximum benefit, it should be read in tandem with his *Systematic Theology*. One helpful plan would be to read his chapter on, for example, the Trinity and then read the corresponding chapter in my book to understand how that doctrine developed in the church over the course of time.<sup>1</sup>

Like Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, my *Historical Theology* was not written for teachers of historical theology and church history, but for students and for all Christians who desire to know how the church has come to believe what it believes today. As such, I have called it "An Introduction to the Development of Christian Doctrine." Entire books have been written about the progression of, for example, the inspiration of Scripture or justification, but this book is intended for Christians who have never studied such evolvement of doctrine. I have tried to recount this development in an understandable way by avoiding the use of technical terms without first explaining them, and by providing helpful glossaries of the people, writings, and events frequently encountered in the book. My hope is that the church, and evangelicals in particular, will become as familiar with the giants of the past—Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, John Wesley, Karl Barth—as they are with Billy Graham, John Piper, J. I. Packer, Chuck Colson, Ravi Zacharias, Tim Keller, Al Mohler, and Mark Driscoll.

Several distinctive features have guided me as I have written *Historical Theology*:

## 1. Present Each Doctrine in Its Chronological Development.

Unlike the vast majority of other historical theology and church history books, which are organized chronologically, my book is organized topically. An example of the common approach is Jaroslav Pelikan's five-volume masterpiece, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*.<sup>2</sup> This collection is organized chronologically: the first volume covers the early church period, from AD 100 to 600; the second volume

1. See p. 19 in this book for a helpful chart, "Reading the Companion Volumes for Greatest Benefit."

2. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971–91): vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic*

*Tradition (100–600)*, 1971; vol. 2, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, 1977; vol. 3, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)*, 1980; vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)*, 1985; vol. 5, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)*, 1991.

covers the development of Eastern Orthodoxy, from 600 to 1700; the third volume covers the medieval church, from 600 to 1300; the fourth volume covers Reformation developments, from 1300 to 1700; and the fifth volume covers the modern period, from 1700 to the present. Within each time period, the various doctrines and their development are treated. Accordingly, to understand the progression of the doctrines of, for example, the inerrancy of Scripture and the person of Jesus Christ, readers must track down those specific topics in each of the five volumes. This approach requires a fair bit of effort, first, to identify where the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of Christ are covered in each volume, and second, to read their entire coverage throughout five volumes.

My *Historical Theology* is organized in the opposite way: it is first arranged topically, then chronologically. Accordingly, to understand the progression of the two doctrines, readers simply turn to chapter 5 to trace the development of the inerrancy of Scripture and chapter 17 to trace the development of the doctrine of the person of Christ. Within each chapter, the progression of the topic starts with the early church (from its New Testament affirmations to 600), moves into the church of the Middle Ages or medieval era (from 600 to 1500), continues with Reformation and post-Reformation developments (1500–1750), and concludes with the modern period (1750 to the present day).<sup>3</sup> Although my book follows an atypical organizational plan, its topical-chronological approach brings together the development of each doctrine in one place for easy reading and reference.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Let the Voices of the Past be Heard in Their Own Words.

Following Grudem's pattern of quoting biblical passages at length, I cite the actual words (in English translation, of course) of church leaders, biblical scholars, and theologians of the past. Unlike the words of Scripture, theirs are not—and never claimed to be—inspired by God. Nonetheless, I think it is important to let these towering figures speak for themselves and for readers to hear their voices ring out across the centuries. If it is true that with historical theology comes “a ‘sensation of pastness,’ the experience of touching right back to a past lived reality,”<sup>5</sup> I want to stimulate that sense of connection, and one way of doing so is to let the voices of the past be heard in their own words. Accordingly, I quote their most significant affirmations and proposals. For space purposes, I place their other important statements in footnotes; only when really pressed for space do I summarize in my own words what they wrote. I also carefully document the most accessible resources from which these citations are taken, for the purpose of making further study as easy as

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3. This division of historical theology into four eras is a typical approach to periodization. The dates are not arbitrary, but neither are they rigid. That is, nothing in particular took place, for example, in the year 600 to mark the end of the early church age and the beginning of the medieval period. As Richard Muller explains: “Even if the lines between these periods cannot be rigidly drawn, there are identifiable characteristics of, for example, patristic [early church] theology that are not duplicated in the other periods of the history of the church. The Reformation did bring about major changes in the life of the church, indeed, in the whole of Western culture, that still have their impact on us today. And the perspectives on God,

man, and the world that dominated the West through the Middle Ages and the Reformation and post-Reformation eras were altered profoundly in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, marking the dawn of the ‘modern’ era.” Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 103.

4. A similar topical-chronological approach can be found in John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: the History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001).

5. John F. McCarthy, *The Science of Historical Theology: Elements of a Definition* (Rome: Propaganda Mariana, 1976), 185.

possible. Without a lot of effort—collecting a reasonable number of books, utilizing computerized software, and accessing the Internet—readers may delve deeper into, for example, my presentation of Origen’s interpretation of Scripture or Anselm’s satisfaction theory of the atonement by finding easy access and clear reference to the former’s *First Principles* or the latter’s *Why God Became Man*. More than a discussion of the historical development of Christian doctrine, this book is also a helpful resource for further reading and study.

### **3. Exercise Restraint in Criticizing Historical Developments.**

I am a Protestant, and unashamedly so. Moreover, I am a conservative evangelical, also without shame. As I studied the progression of doctrines, I at times found myself cringing at the church’s careless interpretation of Scripture, unwarranted appeal to biblical passages, and confusing theological thinking in support of its doctrinal development. Despite my own assessment, I have attempted to refrain personally from criticizing these theological wrong turns. What I have done instead is to note other church voices from the past that have criticized those troubling developments. Sometimes these corrective voices were not sounded for centuries; even then, the church, or certain aspects of it, refused to hear these remedial expressions. This dynamic will be most clearly seen in my account of the development of doctrines (e.g., the authority, clarity, sufficiency, and necessity of Scripture) in the medieval church and the reactionary criticisms in the Reformation and post-Reformation period. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Turretin, Quenstedt, and a host of others adequately and firmly offered their “protestations” against misguided Catholic formulations in those areas, and I allow their criticisms to be heard rather than my own.

I do something similar in my rehearsal of doctrinal drift in the modern era, though at times I offer (briefly) my own personal assessment. This section of my book—the modern period—was the most difficult to write, because the last several centuries have been characterized by attacks—vicious at times, often based on misunderstandings of Scripture and sound doctrine, commonly growing out of an anti-Christian worldview—against every traditional doctrine that the church has cherished from its inception. So harmful have these attacks been that I wish I did not have to cover these assaults against the church. They have left many deep scars; many church members have been led astray and even abandoned their profession of Christ as a result. Churches continue to wrestle with these attacks today. Although I wish I could report successful resistance in every case, such is not the case. Still, Christians can take heart that God for the sake of Christ has always raised up, and continues to call, choice servants to fight back against these dark forces. By tracing the demise of traditional church beliefs during the modern period and illustrating apologetic responses to these assaults, I hope to stimulate others to step forward to defend the faith against current criticisms today.

### **4. Focus on Major Developments in Each Doctrine.**

To offer a concise and introductory historical theology, I have focused on the major developments in thirty-three doctrines.<sup>6</sup> This approach has necessitated that I limit my references

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6. I count my first chapter, “Introduction to Historical Theology,” as one of these topics, just as Grudem has a chapter titled “Introduction to Systematic Theology.”

to the most significant church leaders, biblical scholars, and theologians who have contributed to the development of these doctrines. Accordingly, readers will note the appearance of the same major figures in many, if not all, chapters. Even among these important contributors, I have often needed to make a difficult selection for purposes of space. This emphasis should not be taken to imply that other important figures, as well as many minor figures, did little to shape the contours of these doctrines; indeed, the opposite is usually the case. I encourage readers to use my book as a springboard to deeper exploration by finding monographs on those doctrines whose development they wish to trace in a more detailed manner.

Selection of topics to cover has also been part of writing this book. I treat thirty-three doctrines, corresponding to forty-three (out of fifty-seven) chapters in Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. At times I may combine several of his chapters into one (e.g., his three chapters on the incommunicable and communicable attributes of God become one chapter in my book). For purposes of space, I have not treated some of the doctrines he addresses.<sup>7</sup> In one case, I have included a topic—the interpretation of Scripture—that he does not cover.<sup>8</sup>

Such selection of materials, the concentration on major figures, and even the choice of which doctrines to cover will be criticized by some people. Let me assure these readers that I have felt the pain of having to make difficult selections. Choosing Irenaeus rather than Tertullian to illustrate the early church's rule of faith; picking between Augustine's various writings to present his doctrines of sin and grace; focusing much more on the Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin) than on their successors, the post-Reformers (Quenstedt, Turretin); and opting for a discussion of Schleiermacher's remaking of Christian doctrine rather than that of other important modern liberal figures—I have pondered every selection and second-guessed myself on most decisions. In many cases, I have opted to include the church leaders, biblical scholars, and theologians whose works are most readily accessible (both in terms of availability of resources and clarity of writing) to the general public, for ease of further reading and study. In the end, I humbly stand by my choices, acknowledging that other equally important ones could have been made.<sup>9</sup> Such selectivity means that, while I do tell the story of the historical development of Christians doctrines, it is not the whole story. Still, I hope and believe that my account is sufficient for an introductory book as this work intends to be.

## 5. Focus on the Development of Evangelical Doctrine.

While tracing the broad contours of the development of Christian doctrine, I concentrate on the development of doctrine within evangelicalism, especially as that movement

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7. All of these doctrines are important and deserve treatment, but I did not have space to cover them. For the correspondence between the chapters in Grudem's *Systematic Theology* and my *Historical Theology*, see the helpful chart "Reading the Companion Volumes for Greatest Benefit," on p. 19.

8. In a conversation with Wayne, in which I asked him what he would change if he reworked his *Systematic Theology*, he answered that he would add a chapter on the interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, he noted that when he teaches the beginning theology course at Phoenix Seminary, he includes a section on biblical interpretation. Because of my interest in the

doctrine of Scripture, and due to its ongoing importance for the church, I include a chapter on the historical development of the church's interpretation of Scripture.

9. I thoroughly concur with Geoffrey Bromiley: "Writing a historical theology involves a venture and rests on a series of choices of aim, method, matter, and approach, choices which are in some sense arbitrary and all of which are open to dispute. Even at best, then, the author will do justice neither to the subject, nor to the intention of the author, nor to the expectations of readers." Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), xxi.

exists in North America. The term *evangelical* has come to refer to several things.<sup>10</sup> In one sense, *evangelical* refers to the Lutheran churches that emerged from the Reformation. The term focuses on the centrality of the gospel (Gr. εὐαγγέλιον, *euangelion*) and has a corollary emphasis on Scripture as the normative statement of the gospel for these churches. Second, *evangelical* refers to the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley in Great Britain; Jonathan Edwards in the northeastern colonies of America; George Whitefield, who assisted in both regions; and the German Pietists. All these movements emphasized conversion, piety, evangelism, and social reformation. In America the Great Awakening spawned a revival tradition that manifested itself in the Second Great Awakening (Charles Finney), the Third Great Awakening (Dwight Moody), Billy Graham, and others. In a third sense, *evangelical* is a catchall term for theologically conservative Protestants of whatever heritage who share a set of commitments. Primarily, these are (1) a high view of the Bible (its inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, sufficiency, necessity, and authority); (2) salvation by grace alone through faith in Christ alone as that salvation is communicated through the gospel and empowered by the Holy Spirit; (3) holiness of life; and (4) social engagement of some kind, whether that is championing the culture of life over the culture of death (abortion, euthanasia, infanticide) or involvement in political matters. *Evangelical*, fourthly, refers to the movement that arose out of fundamentalism around the middle of the twentieth century and that is characterized by a network of theological seminaries (e.g., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), publications (e.g., *Christianity Today*), ad hoc evangelistic and social agencies (e.g., Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, World Vision), and organizations (e.g., National Association of Evangelicals, Evangelical Theological Society). Finally, and most recently, *evangelical* refers to an ethos characterized “by social and cultural factors as much as by theological or historical ones. Indeed, a strong case has been made that social and cultural factors are the predominant shapers of current evangelical activity—a point that is raising serious concerns today.”<sup>11</sup>

In this book, the term *evangelical* combines the third and fourth senses from above: It refers to theologically conservative Protestants with certain doctrinal commitments,<sup>12</sup> who are found in many different churches and denominations (Baptist, Presbyterian, Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Congregational, Christian, Brethren,

10. Much of the following discussion is adapted from Mark Noll and David Wells, eds., *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). For further discussion, see the interchange between George M. Marsden and Donald W. Dayton in *Christian Scholar's Review* 23, no. 1 (1993). For a discussion of evangelicalism in Great Britain, see David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicals in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin, 2008).

11. D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4.

12. An example of these common doctrinal elements is the statement of faith of the National Association of Evangelicals: “We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infal-

libe, authoritative Word of God. We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory. We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential. We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life. We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation. We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

independent, Pentecostal, Bible, Holiness, and inter- and nondenominational), and who are characterized by various networks of schools, publications, and the like. Even more specifically, while recognizing the amazing growth of churches worldwide due to extensive evangelical mission work, this book focuses on evangelical Christians and churches in North America. A result of this decision is that the historical development recounted here is primarily that of the theology of the Western church—the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches—and not Eastern Orthodoxy. Another result is that the book concentrates on theological developments in Europe and North America.

#### **6. Discern “A Sense of the Urgent Need for Greater Doctrinal Understanding in the Whole Church.”**

This is one of the distinctive features of Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.<sup>13</sup> I concur wholeheartedly; thus, it is one of my guiding principles. One way of meeting this urgent need is to provide understandable, accessible systematic theologies like his. Another way is to provide understandable, accessible historical theologies like mine. As Christians and their churches are exposed to the development of doctrine, as they are able to trace the progression of their beliefs beginning with the early church, passing into the medieval period, moving into the Reformation and post-Reformation era, and through the modern period up to today, they “will find that understanding (and living) the doctrines of Scripture is one of their greatest joys.”<sup>14</sup>

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13. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 2000), 18.

14. *Ibid.*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank many people for their help in the writing of this book. First, Wayne Grudem took a risk when he asked me, a recently graduated systematic theologian without any publishing experience, to write a historical theology book that would cover everything he did not include in his *Systematic Theology*. He took the initiative in making the proposal to Zondervan and urging the editors to give me the opportunity to carry it out. Wayne has also given me encouragement over a dozen years to persevere in my writing. I am very grateful to him for his friendship.

Zondervan has been more patient with me than I ever could have hoped for, and certainly more than I deserve. Perhaps sensing the immensity of this project, no editor ever sought to rush me through the lengthy process. Even when I turned in the largest rough draft Zondervan had ever received, no one laughed at or chided me. Rather, a calm and simple suggestion was made that I revisit the length of the draft for the sake of keeping the book to one volume. I want to thank especially Jim Ruark, David Frees, and Laura Weller, my editors, for bearing with me in such a kind, gracious, and patient manner. Every one of your suggestions and comments has been on target and made this book better.

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Many books have proved to be valuable resources, and these volumes are listed in the bibliography. Special mention needs to be made of one resource for the development of Christian doctrines in the early church: David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998).

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# READING THE COMPANION VOLUMES FOR GREATEST BENEFIT

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\* I include a chapter on the history of the interpretation of Scripture that Grudem does not cover.

\*\* I do not treat the history of man as male and female.

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\*\*\* I treat the history of the debate over the baptism in and filling with the Holy Spirit together with the work of the Holy Spirit in ch. 20, which thus appears twice in this list.

# ABBREVIATIONS AND SOURCE REFERENCES

- ANF *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 10 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994).
- Anselm *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998).
- Bettenson *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- BSac *Bibliotheca sacra*
- CD Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 13 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936).
- Heppe Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950).
- Holmes Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).
- JBR *Journal of Bible and Religion*
- JETS *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- Kelly J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978).
- LCC Library of Christian Classics, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), diverse volumes.
- LCC 1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), in John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen, gen. eds., Library of Christian Classics, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vol. 20.
- LCC 2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), in John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen, gen. eds., Library of Christian Classics, 26 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vol. 21.
- Lumpkin William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969).

- LW Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, eds., Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986).
- Mansi Joannes Dominicus Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, rev. ed., 31 vols. (Lyons: Petit and Martin, 1899–1927).
- NPNF<sup>1</sup> *Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 1st ser., 14 vols. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994).
- NPNF<sup>2</sup> *Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 2nd ser., 14 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994).
- Pelikan Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971–1991).
- Petry *A History of Christianity: Readings in the History of the Church*, ed. Ray C. Petry, vol. 1: The Early and Medieval Church (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).
- PG *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 165 vols. (Paris: 1857–86).
- PL *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: 1844–64).
- Preus Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970).
- Schaff Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1877–1905).
- Schmid Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1899).
- SJT *Scottish Journal of Theology*
- Summa Contra Gentiles* Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.3, online ed., *An Annotated Translation (with Some Abridgement) of the Summa Contra Gentiles of Saint Thos Aquinas*, trans. Joseph Rickaby (The Catholic Primer, 2005).
- Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Cincinnati, Ohio: Printers to the Holy Apostolic See, 1914.
- Tavard George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959).
- WLS Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, ed. Ewald M. Plass, 3 vols. in 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959).
- WTJ *Westminster Theological Journal*

# INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

***What is historical theology? What benefits does it provide?  
How should we study it?***

Historical theology is the study of the interpretation of Scripture and the formulation of doctrine by the church of the past.<sup>1</sup> Such concentration on the accumulated wisdom of the ages provides great benefit to Christians and churches today as they seek to live faithfully and obediently for Jesus Christ. This high value of historical theology, or church tradition, was underscored by Kenneth Kantzer, one of the founders of modern evangelicalism: “While it is not infallible, it must be acknowledged as God’s guidance of his people in accordance with his promise to the church of all ages.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, church tradition must always have reference to Scripture; hence, historical theology must be either approved or chastened by the Word of God. As J. I. Packer, another leading evangelical, articulated: “Scripture must have the last word on all human attempts to state its meaning, and tradition, viewed as a series of such human attempts, has a ministerial

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, working from the *Formula of Concord*, defined historical theology as the study of what the church “believes, teaches, and confesses as it prays and suffers, serves and obeys, celebrates and awaits the coming of the Kingdom of God.” Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), 143.

2. Kenneth S. Kantzer, “A Systematic Biblical Dogmatics: What Is It and How Is It to Be Done?” in *Doing Theology in Today’s World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer*, ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 466. Kantzer, like many others, distinguished between two senses of tradition. Church Tradition (with a capital T), from a Roman Catholic theology perspective, refers to one aspect of divine revelation. It consists of the teachings of Jesus that he communicated orally to his disciples but which were not written down, and which were transmitted orally from the apostles to their successors, the

bishops. This living Tradition continues in the church today and at times has been proclaimed as official Roman Catholic doctrine. Specifically, Pope Pius IX promulgated the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary in his bull *Ineffabilis Deus* (December 8, 1854), and Pope Pius XII promulgated the dogma of the bodily assumption of Mary in his bull *Munificentissimus Deus* (November 1, 1950). The result of this view of divine revelation is “that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.” *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, November 18, 1965), 9. Church tradition (with a lowercase t) is the accumulated wisdom of the church of the past in terms of its interpretation of Scripture and its formulation of doctrine. This tradition is not part of divine revelation in the Roman Catholic sense but is of great benefit to evangelical churches today, as I argue in this chapter.



rather than a magisterial role.”<sup>3</sup> In determining doctrine and practice, the magisterial, or authoritative, role belongs to Scripture, and Scripture alone. The ministerial, or helping, role accorded to historical theology means that it serves the church in many ways.

One benefit that historical theology offers the church today is helping it *distinguish orthodoxy from heresy*. The term *orthodoxy* here refers to that which the New Testament calls “sound doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1), that which rightly reflects in summary form all the teaching of Scripture and which the church is bound to believe and obey.<sup>4</sup> *Heresy*, then, is anything that contradicts sound doctrine. It is false belief that misinterprets Scripture or that ignores some of the teaching of Scripture, or that incorrectly puts together all the teaching of Scripture. The church is to shun heresy and seek to correct its errors (e.g., Titus 1:9). Expressed another way, historical theology helps the church recognize sound doctrine and distinguish it from false doctrine because, generally speaking, “that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by everyone”<sup>5</sup>—that is, what the church has historically believed and held as its doctrine—corresponds to orthodoxy, and whatever has been traditionally rejected by the church corresponds to heresy. For example, the belief that the Word of God who became incarnate as Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14) was a created being who was not eternal but had a beginning in time was condemned as a heresy by the early church. In accordance with all the teaching of Scripture, the church has always believed that the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, was, is, and always will be fully God, equal in all respects to the Father and the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> A study of historical theology that rehearses the development of doctrine helps churches today to identify and embrace orthodoxy and to reject and correct heresy.<sup>7</sup>

A second benefit of historical theology is that it *provides sound biblical interpretations and theological formulations*. In some cases, the immense effort and careful study exercised by the church in the past has resulted in such excellent biblical and theological understanding that the majority of the groundwork has been laid for the church as it engages in the study of theology today. For example, the early church’s work on the doctrine of the Trinity (one divine essence, three persons) and the doctrine of the

3. J. I. Packer, “The Comfort of Conservatism,” in *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* ed. M. S. Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 288. Alister McGrath concurred: “Tradition is to be honored where it can be shown to be justified and rejected where it cannot. This critical appraisal of tradition was an integral element of the Reformation, and was based on the foundational belief that tradition was ultimately about the interpretation of Scripture—an interpretation which had to be justified with reference to precisely that same authoritative source.” Alister E. McGrath, “The Importance of Tradition for Modern Evangelicalism,” in *Doing Theology for the People of God*, ed. Donald Lewis and Alister E. McGrath (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 160.

4. According to Packer, “The word [orthodoxy] expresses the idea that certain statements accurately embody the revealed truth content of Christianity and are therefore in their own nature normative for the universal church.” J. I.

Packer, “Orthodoxy,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 875.

5. Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitory*, 2.6, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 11:132.

6. For further discussion, see chap. 17.

7. Indeed, as D. H. Williams pointedly asserted with regard to historical theology, specifically of the early church, “If the aim of contemporary evangelicalism is to be doctrinally orthodox and exegetically faithful to Scripture, it cannot be accomplished without recourse to and integration of the foundational Tradition of the early church.... Tradition is not something evangelicals can take or leave.” D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, 13. From a hopeful perspective, historical theology “will help us avoid repeating the doctrinal errors that have arisen at earlier times.” J. Kenneth Grider, “Historical Theology,” in *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Richard Taylor, Willard H. Taylor, and J. Kenneth Grider (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1983), 258.

incarnation (two unchanging natures, divine and human, united in one person) has set forth the essential elements that any current expression of these doctrines will (and must) reflect. Although the present context may raise specific challenges and demand interaction with different issues not faced by the early church as it hammered out these doctrines, its thoughtful work on the Trinity and the incarnation provides a solid foundation from which to face these contemporary tests.<sup>8</sup> Colloquially speaking, though the church may refine and strengthen the proverbial wheel, it has no need to reinvent it. The basic contours of cardinal doctrines have been shaped by the church of the past and thus help churches do theology today.<sup>9</sup>

A third benefit of historical theology is that it *presents stellar examples of faith, love, courage, hope, obedience, and mercy*. Early Christians such as Polycarp, Perpetua, and Felicitas were threatened with death if they would not renounce their faith in Jesus Christ—and they died as martyrs rather than deny the Lord who had saved them.<sup>10</sup> They are examples of perseverance to the point of death for Christians facing persecution today. Athanasius, a mere twenty-nine-year-old secretary at the first ecumenical, or general, council of the church convened at Nicea in 325, understood the importance of sound doctrine. He championed the Nicene confession of the deity of the Son of God and fought against devastating heresy while enduring five exiles for this doctrine of Christ.<sup>11</sup> He is a model of costly commitment to the truth for the church today. A theological interpretation of Scripture enabled Augustine to produce a rich commentary on the gospel of John, which in turn reinforced and helped develop the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>12</sup> *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, an account of his early life and conversion to Christianity, stands as one of the bestsellers in the history of the world and has cheered on many to consider the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> His grace-filled life, theological acumen, and careful study of Scripture are patterns for Christians today. Olympias, a widowed deaconess of the church in Constantinople, leveraged her immense wealth to become a generous patron of the church. She donated many of her estates to the church, supported the ministries of such church leaders as John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus, ransomed exiled captives, sustained a community of 250 virgins, and cared for the

8. An example of this benefit can be seen in many of the responses of evangelicals to the contemporary viewpoint called “open theism.” This heresy had an important forerunner in the movement named Socinianism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which embraced a similar limitation on the divine knowledge. The responses offered by post-Reformers like Francis Turretin to that Socinian version of the heresy have been echoed by contemporary opponents of open theism. See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. in 1 (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1997), 3rd topic, 12th q., 1:206–12.

9. A corollary of this benefit is that historical theology can ascertain “the traditional exegetical foundation for certain dogmas.” With this research in hand, evangelicals can examine whether the foundational passages (1) are interpreted properly, (2) constitute legitimate grounding for those

doctrines, (3) encourage further work on (even modification of) those theological formulations, and (4) prompt consideration of other passages as better warrants for those beliefs. For further discussion, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (London: Hutchinson; New York: Corpus, 1971), 135–36.

10. See *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in Holmes, 226–45; ANF, 1:39–44. For the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas, see *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas*, in ANF, 3:699–706.

11. See, e.g., his *Four Discourses against the Arians*, in NPNF<sup>2</sup>, vol. 4.

12. See his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, in NPNF<sup>1</sup>, vol. 7.

13. See Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, in NPNF<sup>1</sup>, vol. 1.

poor. She is a model of generous giving, hospitality, and mercy.<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther, though excommunicated by the pope and threatened with execution for heresy, was sequestered by his protective friends and hid in the Wartburg Castle for eight months. Dressed as a knight, letting his hair and beard grow long, and going by the alias of Junker Jörg (Knight George), while suffering from loneliness, constipation, insomnia, and satanic attacks, he wrote nearly a dozen books and, as if that accomplishment were not enough, translated the entire New Testament into German.<sup>15</sup> He is an example for today's churches of faith and courage and exhausting labor for the cause of Christ. Such examples from church history could be multiplied thousands of times over.

A fourth benefit that historical theology renders the church is *to protect against the individualism that is rampant today* among Christians. Tragically, numerous factors—a consumerist mentality, an insistence on individual rights, an emphasis on personal autonomy, a pronounced sense of entitlement—have converged to foster an atmosphere in which too many Christians pick and choose their doctrines like they pick and choose their clothes or fast-food meals. If they feel uncomfortable about the sovereignty of God or are upset by the thought of an eternal conscious punishment of the wicked, they opt to overlook or dismiss those doctrines. If their worldly lifestyle is confronted by the demands of sanctification, or if the authority of Scripture challenges their stylish doubts about truth and certainty, they choose to minimize or set aside those doctrines. Thankfully, historical theology can act as a corrective to this regrettable situation. It reminds believers that theirs is a corporate faith that has always affirmed divine sovereignty, hell, holiness, and biblical authority. This rich heritage protects against the tendency to select the doctrines one likes and to reject those one does not like, thus giving in to one's sinful propensities.

Similarly, historical theology can guard Christians and churches from the penchant for the novel,<sup>16</sup> the yearning for relevancy, and the tendency to follow strong leaders who are biblically and theologically shallow. Lamenting evangelicalism's radical proneness to destabilization, Alister McGrath urged this solution: "Rediscovering the corporate and historic nature of the Christian faith reduces the danger of entire communities of faith being misled by charismatic individuals and affirms the ongoing importance of the Christian past as a stabilizing influence in potentially turbulent times."<sup>17</sup> Coining bizarre new doctrines (such as the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel), tampering with traditional doctrines (such as minimizing the need for repentance from sin as part of the response to

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14. See Wendy Mayer, "Poverty and Generosity toward the Poor in the Time of John Chrysostom," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 140–58. The book offers many examples of early Christian hospitality and concern for the poor. See also Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Disturbingly, the radical new atheism, which is quick to point out the evils foisted on society by Christians, seems to be completely unaware of the immense good that Christians have done for the poor, the sick, the marginalized, and the needy. Their ignorance or, more sinister yet, their intentional neglect of

these countless acts of mercy, makes their case against Christianity ring hollow.

15. See Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1977).

16. As Timothy George explained, "The assumption is that recent modes of knowing truth are vastly superior to older ways, that the best equals the latest." He, too, insisted that historical theology can "serve as a bulwark against . . . theological faddism." Timothy George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema: Historical Theology in the Service of the Church," *Review and Expositor* 84 (Fall 1987): 697.

17. McGrath, "Importance of Tradition," 166.

the gospel), and following dynamic leaders who boastfully minimize the importance of sound doctrines, are exposed as dangerous developments by a consideration of what the church has historically believed—or not believed.<sup>18</sup> Again, McGrath offers wise council:

Tradition is like a filter, which allows us to identify suspect teachings immediately. To protest that “We have never believed this before!” is not necessarily to deny the correctness of the teaching in question. But it is to raise a fundamental question: why have Christians not believed this before? And, on further investigation, it usually turns out that there are often very good reasons for not accepting that belief. The past here acts as both a resource and a safeguard, checking unhelpful and unorthodox doctrinal developments by demanding that their supporters explain their historical and theological credentials.<sup>19</sup>

A fifth benefit of historical theology is that it not only helps the church understand the historical development of its beliefs, but enables it *to express those beliefs in contemporary form*. As Richard Muller explained, “Not only does doctrine necessarily arise in a historical context and take its basic conceptual framework and linguistic forms from that context, it also arrives at contemporary expression only by way of a meditation *on*, and even more importantly a meditation *through*, earlier stages of historical expression.”<sup>20</sup> For example, the early church’s doctrine of human nature was formulated in a context affected by Platonic thinking. This philosophy exalted the human spirit while it denigrated the human body; the former aspect is inherently good, asserted Platonism, while the latter aspect is inherently evil. Tragically, a significant part of the early church was negatively

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18. Pelikan, quoting Lord Acton, underscored this important “redemptive” role of historical theology: “‘History must be our deliverer not only from the undue influence of other times, but from the undue influence of our own, from the tyranny of environment and the pressure of the air we breathe. It ... promotes the faculty of resistance to contemporary surroundings by familiarity with other ages and other orbits of thought.’ This humanizing and civilizing force of historical study can give the systematic theologian a healthy detachment from the transiency of dogmatic fashion.” Pelikan, *Historical Theology*, 150. Similarly, B. A. Gerrish urged that historical theology “is a determination to make one’s theological decisions in the best company; and it assumes that proven durability is at least as good a criterion of the best company as is current fashion. As the Anglican divine Richard Hooker shrewdly remarked, ‘There are few things known to be good, till such time as they grow to be ancient.’ This means that in the work of theology we show our highest respect not for the present best-seller, but for the established classics, which have done most to shape the tradition.” B. A. Gerrish, “Theology and the Historical Consciousness,” in *Revisioning the Past: Prospects in Historical Theology*, ed. Mary Potter Engel and Walter E. Wyman Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 290. His citation is from Richard Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, 5.7.3 (London: Everyman’s Library, 1907), 11, 29.

19. McGrath, “Importance of Tradition,” 167. In a stunning thesis, Williams envisioned two tragic outcomes if evangelical churches would not give heed to their doctrinal tradition. He predicted they “(1) will increasingly proliferate a sectarian approach to Christian faith, characterized by an ahistorical and spiritual subjectivism, which Philip Schaff aptly called ‘the great disease which has fastened itself upon the heart of Protestantism,’ and (2) will be more susceptible to the influences of accommodating the church to a pseudo-Christian culture such that the uniqueness of the Christian identity is quietly and unintentionally traded away in the name of effective ministry.” Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism*, 14. Elsewhere, he noted that evangelicalism “cannot avoid the problem of how far we should accommodate the Christian message to the surrounding culture without losing Christian identity.... The formation of a distinct Christian identity in years to come will not be successful unless we deliberately reestablish the link to those resources that provide us with the defining ‘center’ of Christian belief and practice.” Ibid., 12–13. Historical theology can stave off this frightening future.

20. Richard Muller, “The Role of Church History in the Study of Systematic Theology,” in Woodbridge and McComiskey, *Doing Theology in Today’s World*, 79.

influenced by this disregard for, and even contempt of, the body. As a result, Christians placed much of the blame for their sinfulness on the fact of human embodiment, insisted that even sexual intercourse between a husband and wife is tinged with sinful lust, and engaged in ruthless asceticism, denying themselves the good physical gifts of God, such as food, drink, and sleep. Understanding that Platonic context and its influence on the early church's theology helps Christians today reformulate the doctrine of humanity so as to avoid the negative impact of that philosophy.<sup>21</sup> As Timothy George noted, "We must not simply repeat the classical doctrines of the faith with precision and clarity; we must also reflect upon these doctrines in such a way that we can expound them as our own. In this sense historical theology has both a normative and a descriptive role to play."<sup>22</sup>

A sixth benefit of historical theology is that it encourages the church *to focus on the essentials*, that is, to major on those areas that have been emphasized repeatedly throughout the history of the church. For good reason, the church has concentrated much study of Scripture and expended significant theological effort developing doctrines such as the Trinity, the person and work of Jesus Christ, human dignity and depravity, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, salvation, and other cardinal beliefs. These doctrines are the foundation of the gospel, the core of the Christian faith and worldview, and constitute the repeated themes of divine revelation. Fascination with "new truth" and an inordinate attachment to minor beliefs has produced churches that are not centered, not unified, and not missional — "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14). Recognizing and committing themselves to what the church has traditionally emphasized spares churches today from such disasters and helps them become gospel-focused communities.<sup>23</sup>

A seventh benefit of historical theology is that it gives the church *hope by providing assurance that Jesus is fulfilling his promise to his people*. One of the most important biblical passages throughout the history of the church has been Matthew 16:13–20. Peter, by means of divine revelation, grasped the identity of his friend Jesus and confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." At this confession, Jesus promised, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Throughout its nearly two-thousand-year pilgrimage, the church has advanced through periods of great faithfulness, obedience, dedication, and missional endeavors, and it has persevered through other periods of carnality, political posturing, disengagement, and heresy. If Luther's sinner-saint label is true of individual Christians, it is equally true of the church

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21. They may also note that some leaders in the early church acknowledged this corrupting influence and sought to avoid it, emphasizing the goodness of the material creation, recognizing that the embodiment of the Son of God in the incarnation did not result in him being sinful, and embracing the hope of the future resurrection of the body. For further discussion, see chap. 15. For a contemporary example of the reformulation of the doctrine of humanity, with an emphasis on holistic dualism or dualistic holism, see John Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Apollos, 1989, 2000).

22. Timothy George, "Dogma Beyond Anathema," 693. He added, "It is always proper and necessary to rethink and reformulate the classic expressions of the faith; but we must do so in a way that does not do violence to the intention of those expressions, insofar as they faithfully reflect the primary witness of Scripture itself." *Ibid.*, 700.

23. A corollary of this emphasis on the major doctrines is that "there must be, in thoughtful minds, different degrees, different depths of conviction: of some things we can be more sure than others." John Stoughton, *An Introduction to Historical Theology* (London: Religious Tract Society, n.d.), 9.

itself. Even today, as churches find themselves in the midst of perhaps the most tumultuous period of their history—external attacks by a new and virulent form of atheism, internal confusion over the gospel and worship, cultural doubts about the relevancy of the Christian faith, postmodern questioning of truth and authority, and rampant revisioning of many cardinal doctrines—they experience both victory and defeat. Historical theology provides hope by reminding them that God for Christ’s sake has always been faithful to his promise to build his church.<sup>24</sup> Certainly the development of doctrine is a thoroughly human process, carried out by the church. But such development has a divine origin—it is the church of *Jesus Christ*, and he is at work to build his church.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, as beneficiaries of the heritage of doctrinal development sovereignly overseen by Jesus Christ, the church of today is privileged *to enjoy a sense of belonging to the church of the past*. In words reflective of a more literary past, John Stoughton affirmed concerning historical theology: “It attaches us to former generations, and inspires us with satisfaction and joy to find, that in the substance of evangelical faith and sentiment we are one with the Church of all ages. To feel this is a prelibation [celebratory foretaste] of heaven, where our present-time relations will cease, ancestry and posterity will become contemporaneous, the faith of one will confirm the faith of another, and the joy of all will be the joy of each.”<sup>26</sup> The church today is heir to a great legacy, a heritage that can provide a sense of rootedness, depth, certainty, and hope.<sup>27</sup>

Given all of these benefits, the question arises of how one studies historical theology.<sup>28</sup> Two basic approaches are commonly found: synchronic and diachronic. The *synchronic approach* engages in the study of the theology of a certain time period, a particular theologian, a specific theological school or tradition, and the like. Examples of this approach include the study of the doctrine of the Trinity in the third and fourth centuries, the development of Christology in the fourth and fifth centuries, the theology of John Calvin, and neoorthodox theologies of the Word of God. The *diachronic approach* engages in the study of the development of thought on a given doctrine throughout the periods of the church’s history. Examples of

24. R. P. C. Hanson chastised detractors of church history, who “assume that it can throw no light on what the Christian faith is about, on the activity and character of God as seen in Christianity, or by Christians.” R. P. C. Hanson, “Introduction to Volume 2,” in *The Pelican Guide to Modern Theology*, vol. 2: *Historical Theology*, ed. Jean Danielou, A. H. Couratin, and John Kent (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), 10.

25. Stoughton explained this development as “the growth of a human process, though starting from a Divine origin, and continued under Divine culture.” Stoughton, *Introduction to Historical Theology*, 8.

26. *Ibid.*, 13.

27. As Muller noted, this benefit for the church becomes a benefit for the individual Christian: “The study of the history of the church and its teachings is not only an objective, external discipline, it is also a subjective, internal exercise by which and through which the life and mind of the church becomes an integral part of the life and mind of the individual Christian.” Richard A. Muller, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Foundations of

Contemporary Interpretation, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 107.

28. Clearly, historical theology “must engage with literary sources just like other” historical disciplines. “Literary criticism is needed to establish authorship or provenance of books. Textual criticism must restore the text where copying errors have crept in. Once the historian has a good text and knows where it comes from, he can begin interpretation. Often that means translating from an ancient into a modern language to make it accessible to other theologians. But he must also explain the context, the thought-world of the writer being expounded, and especially the sources he used and the influence he had on others.” Stuart G. Hall, “Theological History and Historical Theology,” in *The Threshold of Theology*, ed. Paul Davis (Basingstoke, UK: Marshall Pickering, 1988), 107–8. Thus, numerous parallels are found between establishing and interpreting biblical texts and establishing and interpreting historical texts. As an introductory work on historical theology, this book does not delve into these issues.



this approach include the study of the doctrines of Scripture and sin as developed in the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation and post-Reformation period, and the modern period. As noted in the preface, this book follows the latter, diachronic approach.

Within this approach, two perspectives are commonly adopted. One is the relativist perspective; the other, the essentialist. According to the first, the development of doctrine over the course of the centuries exhibits such an immense diversity that it is not possible to identify a core, or essential center, of the Christian faith. The relativist perspective draws attention to “diversity, disagreement, discontinuity, loose ends, and wrong turnings” as the church developed its beliefs.<sup>29</sup> In its extreme form, “unrestrained relativism . . . claims that no manifestation of Christianity enjoys any logical or theological priority over any other. Therefore the smallest sect has as much doctrinal authority as the longest-lived or [most] widely dispersed world church. As such, since Christianities are so different, they are all equally right and equally wrong.”<sup>30</sup> Such relativism naturally leads to alarm and “the despair of finding no certainty, nothing fixed to believe.”<sup>31</sup> This book does not accept the relativist perspective.

The second perspective holds that an essential Christian theology does exist. In its extreme form, “this view argues that, in truth, only one ‘correct’ Christianity has been handed down, and that all others are erroneous and deviant.”<sup>32</sup> This radical position usually sustains itself by ignoring historical theology and its demonstration that doctrines have indeed developed over time. Alternatively, it considers every development of church tradition between the closing of the New Testament and the appearance of the group championing this extreme view as being defective. Variations of this essentialist perspective moderate this unsustainable extreme position. The viewpoint of this book is a moderate essentialist perspective: An essential center, a core, of Christian doctrine, does indeed exist, but it does not manifest itself in any one particular church or theological movement, for several reasons: (1) No pure church exists. This fact means that no tradition can legitimately claim complete doctrinal accuracy. (2) Scripture itself emphasizes the incompleteness of theological knowledge in this church age. As Paul affirms, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Complete theological knowledge awaits the return of Jesus Christ and thus cannot be attained in this age. (3) All doctrinal formulation “is deeply involved with the cultural background and the philosophical assumptions of the period during which it is taking place.”<sup>33</sup> To the extent that this cultural context and philosophical framework cloud the proper interpretation of Scripture and theological understanding, such formulation diverges from the truth.<sup>34</sup> These and other factors work against achieving complete doctrinal purity,

29. Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches' Past* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), x.

30. *Ibid.*, 6.

31. *Ibid.*, x.

32. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

33. Hanson, “Introduction to Volume 2,” 14.

34. Indeed, historical theology “dispels the illusion that

theologians of any school have drawn their opinions, entirely and exclusively, from the fountain of God. It throws light on the genesis of opinion. And we are brought to see how metaphysics and logic, tradition and Church authority, education, circumstances, and intellectual idiosyncrasy, have had to do with forming theological thought.” Stoughton, *Introduction to Historical Theology*, 6.



and they counter any claim to possess it during the church's earthly pilgrimage. This is the negative side.

A positive side also exists. In addition to his work of disclosing and inscripturating divine revelation, the Holy Spirit illuminates Scripture, the Word of God (1 Cor. 2:6–16). Accordingly, Christians can prayerfully engage in careful exegesis in reliance on the Spirit to bring more proper understanding of the Bible. Moreover, as noted above, Jesus Christ has promised to build his church (Matt. 16:13–20), so churches can take heart that he is at work to bring about greater theological correctness. Indeed, he has equipped the church with all the resources it needs to move toward greater and greater doctrinal purity. Specifically, Christ has endowed the church with gifted leaders “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:12–14).<sup>35</sup> As church leaders teach and equip their members, and as everyone engages in “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15; clearly communicating sound doctrine so as to build up rather than tear down), the church will advance in theological purity. These and other reasons provide hope, not only that an essential core of Christian doctrine exists, but also that churches can move progressively closer to recognizing and affirming this sound doctrine. Historical theology aids in this effort as well, as it “shows how the church and its word, moving across the centuries and continents, have come from there to here with an ongoing continuity in spite of every discontinuity.”<sup>36</sup> This ongoing continuity is the core, or essential center, of the Christian faith. It is given expression by the church in different shapes and forms throughout the ages, and though each expression is culturally and historically conditioned, it can nevertheless be an adequate expression of the truth for the church during its earthly pilgrimage.<sup>37</sup>

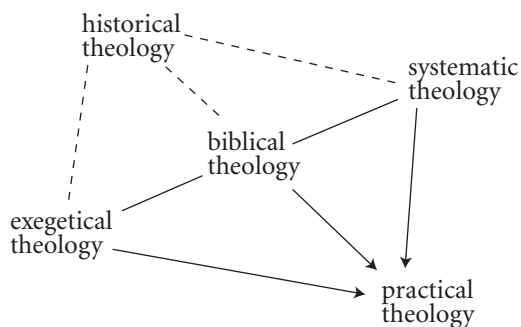
35. As this passage implies, some doctrinal formulations are incorrect and must be rejected. Cameron, repudiating the relativist perspective, noted that “if there is an essential Christianity ... there must necessarily be forms that are *so* deviant that they do not represent a valid interpretation of Christian teaching and belief, in effect ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to adapt Christianity to its conditions.... A cultural adaptation which spins on too eccentric an orbit may come to appear ... as not just an adaptation but a deviation, perversion, or distortion of the Christian message. Even within what could broadly be called the Christian mainstream ... at various times beliefs and practices have arisen which *all* subsequent churches have declared to be misapprehensions, exaggerations, or distortions of what Christianity ought to mean.” Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History*, 236–37. Because of, and in response to, these aberrations, “there are times in the life of the church when it is necessary to say, ‘Be accursed, be delivered up to the wrath of God and destroyed,’ for that is what anathema means in the original Pauline sense: ‘If anyone preaches another gos-

pel, let him [be] anathema!’ [Gal. 1:8, 9].... Karl Barth was surely right when he said, ‘If we do not have the confidence of *damnamus* [we anathematize], we ought to omit *credimus* [we believe], and go back to doing theology as usual.’” George, “Dogma beyond Anathema,” 704. His citation of Barth is from CD, I/1, 630.

36. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), xxvi.

37. To insist on some level of absolute perfection for doctrinal expression in this church age is to chase after a phantom, and such perfection is not necessary—nor required by God. He himself, in his communication to human beings, accommodated his revelation so that it would be intelligible to us. In so doing, he did not invent some perfect heavenly language but employed instead common human languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. When the Son of God taught his disciples and the crowds as the incarnate God-man, he used figures of speech and illustrations drawn from everyday life. If such communication is adequate for divine revelation, it is

Although a discipline in itself, historical theology is also related to several other important biblical and theological disciplines, namely, exegetical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology. The following diagram and discussion represent and explain the integration of these disciplines:<sup>38</sup>



Let the solid line connecting exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology represent the line of authority, because each of these disciplines works directly with Scripture, the inspired Word of God. Exegetical theology seeks to determine the meaning of biblical texts. Biblical theology describes the progressive revelation found in Scripture by examining the theology of its various groupings (e.g., the theology of the Pentateuch and the theology of the Synoptic Gospels). It also traces the many themes in these biblical groupings and notes their development over time. Systematic theology expresses what Christians and churches are to believe, do, and be today in accordance with all the teaching of Scripture. Having identified the key passages concerning the worship of God, for example, exegetical theology unpacks the meaning of those passages, biblical theology notes the progressive development in the ways God ordered his people to worship (e.g., building altars, worshiping in the tabernacle and the temple, worshiping in spirit and truth), and systematic theology prescribes worship as celebrating the covenant relationship that Christians enjoy with God and that is made possible through the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and directed by the Spirit of God according to the Word of God. Work in

certainly adequate for the church's theological formulation. Furthermore, as Muller affirmed in regard to the inescapable historical and cultural conditioning of all expressions of Christian doctrine (a reason often given for rejecting them), "every statement that we make is conditioned by the social, cultural, political, and religious context out of which we have come and in which we make the statement—but this fundamental fact of our intellectual and spiritual life does not lead us to cease and desist from making statements.... What is more, it is hardly the case that the cultural and historical conditionedness of a statement places a barrier in the way of understanding. Quite to the contrary, it is the historical and cultural location of a particular statement or doctrine or

theory that makes it intelligible to a particular culture at a particular time in history. Normative theological statements must be historically and culturally conditioned—indeed, the way in which they belong to and reflect the culture and the time to which they speak accounts for their normative status." Muller, "Role of Church History," 91–92.

38. The genesis of the following model is two articles by D. A. Carson: "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," in Woodbridge and McComiskey, *Doing Theology in Today's World*, 39–76; and "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 65–95.

exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology, all of which deal directly with Scripture (thus, placed on the solid line), constitutes the important interpretive and organizational process in constructing theology.

The important role that historical theology (represented by the dashed lines) plays in this interpretive and organizing process is to inform each of the three disciplines with wisdom from the past. Because this discipline does not deal with Scripture directly, I have placed it behind the line of authority, not on it. This placement reflects what Packer noted earlier: Historical theology is ministerial, not magisterial. It does not possess the authority to determine doctrine and practice like the other disciplines, but it still has a very important role to play as an aid to the other three. For example, historical theology helps exegetical theology by providing interpretive insights for the determination of the meaning of Jesus' affirmation that "[God's] worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Historical theology helps biblical theology by noting various approaches to the relationship between the worship of God in the tabernacle and temple (under the old covenant) and the worship of God in the church (under the new covenant). Historical theology helps systematic theology by offering different formulations of the theology of worship and how the church of the past actually engaged in services of worship. Contemporary Christians, then, are aided by historical theology as they interpret Scripture, do biblical theology, and construct their systematic theology.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, this entire biblical and theological process is oriented toward practical theology (represented by the arrowed lines coming out toward the readers).<sup>40</sup> Practical theology consists of the communication of the Word of God to churches today through preaching, teaching, discipling, mentoring, counseling, and so forth. Accordingly, what is heard from pulpits, discussed in small group Bible studies, offered in counseling sessions, and the like reflects the wisdom of the church of the past—historical theology.

Thankfully, the last several decades have witnessed a growing interest in historical theology on the part of many in the church.<sup>41</sup> Wonderful new tools now make the biblical

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39. Muller cautioned about two possible errors in constructing a systematic theology: "When systematic theology in the larger sense—the contemporary discipline of theological statement—fails to take seriously the foundational materials provided by biblical and historical study, it not only brings down on itself the charge of methodological ineptitude and of failure to recognize its own historical conditionedness, it also gives itself over to increasingly arbitrary and rootless speculations. In other words, systematic theology cannot either simply repeat the doctrinal, philosophical, and phenomenological results of previous generations or argue its own case, whether doctrinally, philosophically, or phenomenologically, in the present, without reference to the foundational disciplines. On the other hand, systematic theology cannot afford to be merely the repetition of the results of biblical theology and the history of doctrine. A systematic theology that duplicates the materials of either one of these essentially historical disciplines will fail to address the present and will appear like a relic of the past taken from a museum." Muller, *Study of Theology*, 162.

40. Working with a slightly different model, Schubert Ogden explained, "The critical interpretation of the past provided by historical theology is never simply an end in itself, but also always the means, even if the indispensable means, to the ulterior end of critical validation, which systematic theology and practical theology are constituted to attain. In this sense, doing historical theology, from its end, anticipates the work of its sister disciplines, even as they, for their part, necessarily presuppose its work." Schubert M. Ogden, "Prolegomena to Historical Theology," in Engel and Wyman, *Revisioning the Past*, 27.

41. D. H. Williams has been a major contributor to this growing interest. His book *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* targeted evangelicals, especially those in the Free Church or "believers' church," the nonmagisterial wing of the Reformation ("magisterial" refers to those churches—Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican—that accepted the centuries old church-state situation). "Free" refers to the conviction that true churches must be liberated from state control and

and theological insights of the church of the past available not only to scholars, but also to pastors, Sunday school teachers, and laypeople.<sup>42</sup> This book is offered in the hope of continuing this trend of making historical theology accessible to believers and their churches.

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influence. Examples abound: Mennonites, Baptists, Congregationalists, Evangelical Free churches, Methodists, and Holiness and Restorationist churches (Nazarene, Disciples of Christ/Christian Church, Brethren, Pentecostal, Bible churches). He has followed up that book with work as editor of an important series: *Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church's Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic). He has two books in that series: *Evangelicals and Tra-*

*dition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (2005) and *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (2006).

42. E.g., Thomas Oden is the general editor of an important series that makes the early church's interpretation of all the books of the Bible (and the Apocrypha) available: *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 29 vols. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000–10).

Part 1

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THE DOCTRINE  
OF THE WORD  
OF GOD

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# THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

***How has the church come to believe what belongs in the Bible and what does not belong?***

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## STATEMENT OF BELIEF

The church has historically believed that a specific set of writings—called the *canon of Scripture*—composes the Old and New Testaments. This list of divinely inspired and authoritative narratives, prophecies, gospels, letters, and other writings that make up the Word of God developed in the early church. The canon of the Protestant church differs from that of the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant canon is composed of sixty-six books, while the Catholic canon is more extensive. It includes the *Apocrypha*, extra books in the Old Testament (e.g., Tobit, Judith), and additions to certain Old Testament writings as found in the Protestant Bible (e.g., additions to Esther, Bell and the Dragon). Evangelical churches follow the Protestant canon.<sup>1</sup>

## THE CANON IN THE EARLY CHURCH

From its beginning on the day of Pentecost, the church considered the Hebrew Bible to be the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21). The writings that composed the Jewish Scriptures—now called the Old Testament—were fixed and had been so for several centuries prior to the coming of Jesus Christ. The eminent Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37–100) noted: “From Artaxerxes [464–423 BC] to our own time the complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, although other writings (e.g., 1 and 2 Maccabees, a history of the Jews in the second century before Christ) were in circulation among the Jewish people at the time of the early church, none of these had been inserted into the canon of the Hebrew Bible and recognized as part

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1. My thanks to Lenny Cheng for his help with this chapter.

2. Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.41. A similar sentiment is expressed in rabbinical literature: “After the latter prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi had died, the Holy Spirit

departed from Israel, but they still availed themselves of the *bath qol* (or *bath kol*, a voice from heaven).” Babylonian Talmud, *Yomah* 9b, repeated in *Sotah* 48b, *Sanhedrin* 11a, and Midrash *Rabbah* on Song of Songs, 8.9.3.

of the authoritative Word of God. Indeed, the canon of the Jewish Scriptures had come to a close at the time of the writing of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther (435 BC). No other writings had been — nor could have been — added to the Hebrew Bible in the intervening period, because divine inspiration of the prophets had ceased.

What did the Hebrew Bible look like? Josephus noted twenty-two divinely inspired books in the Hebrew canon: the five books of Moses, thirteen prophetic books, and four books containing hymns and precepts.<sup>3</sup> Later Jewish reckonings of the Hebrew Bible typically listed twenty-four books distributed in three divisions: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.<sup>4</sup>

**The Hebrew Canon (according to the Talmud)**

<i>The Law</i>	<i>The Prophets</i>	<i>The Writings</i>
Genesis	Joshua	Ruth
Exodus	Judges	Psalms
Leviticus	Samuel	Job
Numbers	Kings	Proverbs
Deuteronomy	Jeremiah	Ecclesiastes
	Ezekiel	Song of Songs
	Isaiah	Lamentations
	Twelve Minor Prophets	Daniel
		Esther
		Ezra–Nehemiah
		Chronicles

This Hebrew Bible, with its fixed canon, was the Bible of the early church.<sup>5</sup> Although it contained obvious differences in order and grouping from the Old Testament with which

3. Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.37. The books of Moses were the traditional Pentateuch. The prophetic books were Joshua, Judges–Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah–Lamentations, Ezekiel, the Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi), Job, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, Chronicles, and Esther. The last category consisted of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. Note that the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, while appearing as two books in our Old Testament, were considered one book each in the Hebrew canon of Josephus. Also, Judges and Ruth, Jeremiah and Lamentations, and Ezra and Nehemiah, while separated in our Old Testament, were joined together and considered one book in this ordering.

4. *Baba Bathra* 14b–15a. The Minor Prophets are the same as in Josephus. Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles are not divided but considered one book each. Ezra and Nehemiah are joined

together and considered one book. The difference between this rendering of the canon and that of Josephus, besides the change in the ordering of the books, is the separation of Ruth from Judges and Jeremiah from Lamentations. This adds two more books to the total, raising Josephus’s twenty-two-book canon to a twenty-four-book canon.

5. The Council of Jamnia, a meeting of rabbinic scholars about AD 90, was once thought to be the focal point for deciding the canon of Hebrew Scripture. Current thought views the council as discussing the inspiration of several of the books in the canon, but not as deciding which books to include or exclude from the canon. The closure of the Hebrew canon had been set for quite some time prior to Jamnia. Jack P. Lewis, “What Do We Mean by Jabneh?” *JBR* 32 (1964): 125–32; Robert C. Newman, “The Council of Jamnia and the Old Testament Canon,” *WTJ* 38 (1976): 319–49.



today's church is familiar, all of the books that we consider to be canonical were present and together composed the Word of God for the Jewish people—and the early church.

Following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, together with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to initiate the church, a new phase of revelation began. While relying on the authority of the divinely inspired Hebrew Scriptures, the church was conscious of being the recipient of new truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Christian mission in the world.

The ultimate source of this truth was God himself. Justin Martyr resolutely affirmed, “For I choose to follow not men or men’s doctrines, but God and the doctrines [delivered] by him.”<sup>6</sup> God the Father passed on this truth to his Son; thus, he should be followed as “the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus Christ, in turn, entrusted this truth to certain faithful people, custodians and communicators of the revelation. Chief among these were the apostles, the eyewitnesses of Christ and his ministry and the architects of the church itself. The revelation entrusted to these apostles could not be separated, however, from the earlier revelation given through the prophets. The Spirit of Christ had been active within the prophets as they foretold his coming, and that same Spirit was active in the apostles to give inspired understanding of Christ’s coming. Thus, Polycarp urged obedience to Jesus Christ, “just as he himself has commanded us, as did the apostles who preached the gospel to us, and the prophets, who announced in advance the coming of our Lord.”<sup>8</sup>

Not everyone agreed with this harmony, however. Beginning in the second century, heretics emphasized an apparent conflict between the prophets and the new Christian truth. To counter this, the apologists (Christian writers who defended the faith) underscored the unity of the prophetic and apostolic revelation. Tertullian, speaking of the church, noted: “The law and the prophets she unites in one volume with the writings of the evangelists and apostles; from which she drinks in [receives] her faith.”<sup>9</sup> Although the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied of the coming of Christ and the new revelation to the church explained that coming after the fact, this difference in perspectives did not destroy the unity of the truth. Irenaeus noted: “I have pointed out the truth, and shown the preaching of the church, which the prophets proclaimed but which Christ brought to perfection, and the apostles have handed down. From which the church, receiving [these truths], and throughout all the world alone preserving them in their integrity, has transmitted them to her sons.”<sup>10</sup> The old and new revelations composed a unity. Thus, Tertullian accused Marcion, a leading heretic, of being the “author of the breach of peace between the gospel and the law,” whereas the church found no distinction between the predictions of the prophets and the declarations of the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

Our discussion may give the wrong impression that the early church possessed a written Bible readily available to all its members (much like each of us taking our own copy of

6. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, 80.3, in ANF, 1:239.

7. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.preface, in ANF, 1:526.

8. Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*, 6.3, in Holmes, 213; ANF, 1:34.

9. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 36, in ANF, 3:260.

10. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.preface, in ANF, 1:526.

11. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1.19; 4.39, in ANF, 3:285, 416.

the Bible to church and Bible study). This, however, was not the case. Indeed, for the first few decades of its existence, the church had only oral stories that it could pass on. Even when the last writings of what was to become the New Testament were being penned, the church was still largely dependent on unwritten tradition, which continued for the first several centuries of the church.

These written records and unwritten tradition were seen as two parts of a unified whole, and the early church appealed to both to express its doctrine and to fight heresy. “The only true and life-giving faith, which the church has received from the apostles and imparted to her sons,”<sup>12</sup> was referred to as “the glorious and holy rule of our tradition,” “the rule of faith,” and “the rule (or canon) of truth.”<sup>13</sup> This tradition was essentially fixed and agreed upon by all the churches,<sup>14</sup> with its content being a succinct statement of essential Christian doctrine.<sup>15</sup> Whatever was believed in the church had to conform to this rule of faith. Indeed, true doctrine could be distinguished from false by tracing its origin to “the tradition of the apostles.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, this rule of faith was public knowledge, accessible to everyone. Thus, it stood in contrast to certain heresies that claimed a “secret knowledge” of the truths of the Christian faith. This hidden wisdom was reserved for the elite of these erring movements and often went against biblical teaching. Not so for apostolic tradition: It was public knowledge in conformity with Scripture.

The recipients and transmitters of this tradition were, in particular, the successors of the apostles, the bishops who led the churches. They were the guarantee that what was believed and practiced by the churches was in accord with this apostolic rule of faith. These bishops were not a source of new revelation that stood alongside of written Scripture. They were, instead, faithful transmitters of the truth received from the apostles—and ultimately from God himself. Tertullian held that “all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches—those molds and original sources of the faith—must be reckoned for truth, as undoubtedly containing that which the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God.”<sup>17</sup>

Eventually, some of this apostolic tradition was written down. In this way “the gospel has come down to us, which [the apostles] did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.”<sup>18</sup> As noted earlier, the apostolic tradition and the written apostolic records were a unified whole in the early church; the tension between these two that we will witness later was not present. This was due to the harmony that existed between them: Tradition was a summary of biblical truth, and when heretics twisted Scripture, the apologists would turn to the tradition to underscore how Scripture was and should be understood in the church. This unity of unwritten and written truth—together with the harmony between Hebrew Scripture and apostolic revelation—was

12. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.preface, in ANF, 1:414.

13. Clement of Rome, *Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians*, 7.2, in Holmes, 37; ANF, 1:7; Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 12, in ANF, 3:249; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.22.2, in ANF, 1:347. Irenaeus also calls it “the sure tradition from the apostles.” *Against Heresies* 5.20.1, in ANF, 1:548.

14. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.2, in ANF, 1:331.

15. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 13, in ANF, 3:249; cf. *Against Praxeas*, 2, in ANF, 3:598–99. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.10.1, in ANF, 1:330.

16. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 21, in ANF, 3:252.

17. *Ibid.*; cf. 37, in ANF, 3:252, 261.

18. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, in ANF, 1:414.

keenly expressed by Irenaeus in his appeal to “the preaching of the apostles, the authoritative teaching of the Lord, the announcements of the prophets, the dictated utterances [i.e., written records] of the apostles, and the administration of the law.”<sup>19</sup> Together, Scripture and tradition provided the foundation of truth for the early church. Heretics, those outside of the church, were criticized because they “consent neither to Scripture nor to tradition.”<sup>20</sup>

To the collection of authoritative Hebrew Scripture were eventually added some additional writings in the form of gospels, a historical account, letters, and an apocalypse (a revelation of future events). Some of these writings themselves pointed to an expansion of the canon of Scripture. For example, Peter spoke of the letters of the apostle Paul in the context of “the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:14–16), and Paul himself connected a saying of Jesus (“The laborer is worthy of his wages”) with Deuteronomy 25:4, referring to both as “Scripture” (1 Tim. 5:18).<sup>21</sup>

The earliest Christian writings outside of our New Testament continued this practice of elevating the words of Jesus and the writings of the apostles, recognizing in them the authority of divine revelation. One example was a reference by Polycarp to a portion of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (4:26) as “Scripture.”<sup>22</sup> Another came from an anonymous work that noted the complementary authority of “the Books” (the Old Testament) and “the Apostles.”<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the *Letter of Barnabas* quoted Jesus’ words (“Many are invited, but few are chosen”; Matt. 22:14) with the introductory formula “it is written,” an expression that was reserved for citations from Old Testament Scripture.<sup>24</sup>

A crucial question arose: Which of the writings from the early church should be included in this expanding canon—consisting of both the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) and the New Testament? (Irenaeus was the first to call the two parts of this collection the Old and New Testaments.)<sup>25</sup> The letters of Paul, written by an apostle clearly invested with divine authority, were easily recognized as belonging to canonical Scripture. But what about the anonymous letter to the Hebrews? Why should Mark and Luke be placed alongside the gospels written by the apostles Matthew and John? And what about the *Letter of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, two very early writings that enjoyed widespread circulation in the early church?

This issue of the canon of Scripture became particularly critical when false teachers and prophets appeared. Marcion, for example, was a leader of a heretical movement whose views were obviously wrong. His “canon” of Scripture consisted of “the Gospel and the Apostle” (a mutilated version of the gospel of Luke and ten letters of Paul). Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and all parts of the growing New Testament that

19. Ibid., 2.35.4, in ANF, 1:413.

20. Ibid., 3.2.2, in ANF, 1:415.

21. Whether Paul quoted Luke 10:7 or an oral teaching of Jesus Christ is disputed.

22. Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*, 12.1, in Holmes, 219; ANF, 1:35.

23. 2 *Clement*, 14.2. The writing was misnamed Clement’s *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, in Holmes, 121; ANF, 10:255.

24. *Letter of Barnabas*, 4.14, in Holmes, 283; ANF, 1:139.

25. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.9.1, in ANF, 1:472. Irenaeus, referring to Matthew 13:52, explained: “Now without contradiction the Lord means by those things which are brought forth from the treasure new and old, the two covenants; the old, that giving of the law which took place formerly; and he points out as the new that manner of life required by the gospel.... But one and the same householder produced both covenants, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.”

reflected favorably upon the Old.<sup>26</sup> The early church was rightly concerned by Marcion's views and recognized that his restricted canon of Scripture fostered his heretical theology. His "canon" was wrong—obviously. But what writings *should be included* in the true canon?

The church turned to defining the canon of Scripture. Two key criteria emerged to determine which writings to include in the canon: (1) *apostolicity*: Does this writing have an apostle for its author (e.g., Paul's letters, the gospels of Matthew and John)? If not, is an apostle associated with this writing (e.g., Mark's gospel records the account of the apostle Peter)? (2) *antiquity*: Has the church historically recognized the voice of God speaking to his people in this writing? Although equipped with these criteria, the church did not set out to *determine* the canon of Scripture as much as to *recognize* and *affirm* those authoritative, inspired writings that God intended for inclusion in his Word.

Several attempts at this have come down to us. The following lists set forth the views of the biblical canon by key individuals of the early church. Some are formal lists; others are compiled by an analysis of the individual's writings. One should keep in mind that a particular list (e.g., Eusebius's canon) may reflect its author's personal convictions regarding the canon, and these may be different from the consensus of the church at the time. (Writings that are not in our New Testament are in italics.)

The first list dates to about AD 170. The *Muratorian Canon* consisted of the following:

The Muratorian Canon (AD 170)		
<i>Canonical writings</i>	<i>Missing from this list</i>	<i>Rejected writings</i>
The four Gospels	Hebrews	<i>Paul to the Laodiceans</i>
Acts of the Apostles	James	<i>Paul to the Alexandrians</i>
Thirteen letters of Paul	1 and 2 Peter	<i>Shepherd of Hermas</i>
Jude	3 John	(Other Gnostic writings)
1 and 2 John		
Revelation of John		
<i>Wisdom of Solomon</i>		
<i>Revelation of Peter</i>		

26. From the gospel of Luke, Marcion removed the account of Jesus' birth as well as any reference to Jesus acknowledging the Creator God to be his Father. From the Pauline corpus he removed all of the apostle's references to Old Testament prophecies of Christ's advent as well as any reference to the Creator God as the Father of Jesus. Moreover, he did not include 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.27.2, in ANF, 1:352.

27. The *Muratorian Canon* is named for the Italian archae-

ologist L. A. Muratori (1672–1750), who discovered and published the document in *Antiquitates Italicae Medii Aevi*, III (Milan, 1740). The document is a fragment and begins with a concluding discussion of Mark's gospel and continues with a discussion of "the third book of the Gospel, that according to Luke." Some emendations of the corrupted text restore 1 Peter and even 2 Peter. For the complete text, see Alexander Souter, *The Text and Canon of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1954), 191ff.

Because of the fragmentary nature of the *Muratorian Canon*, we cannot be absolutely certain that some or all of the “missing” writings were not indeed considered canonical.<sup>27</sup>

About this same time, another heretical group arose. Called Montanism after its founder, Montanus, this movement encouraged an eager anticipation of the Lord’s quick return by appealing to new revelations given by the Holy Spirit. The church responded to this emphasis on revelation outside of the Bible by underscoring the closed canon of Scripture. Eusebius, in confronting this heresy, carefully avoided formulating a response that would seem to carry authority like that of Scripture—the very heresy he was attacking! He spoke of “the doctrine of the New Testament, to which it is impossible that any thing should be added or diminished, by one who has resolved to live according to the gospel.”<sup>28</sup> Although he did not provide a list of the New Testament writings, he did confirm the church’s sense that one could not add to or subtract from the closed canon of Scripture.

By the middle of the third century, Origen was using this New Testament:<sup>29</sup>

Origen’s Canon (Mid Third Century)	
<i>Canonical writings</i>	<i>Disputed writings</i>
The four Gospels	Hebrews
Acts of the Apostles	2 Peter (?)
Thirteen letters of Paul	2 and 3 John
James	
Jude (?)	
1 Peter	
2 Peter (?)	
1 John	
Jude (?)	
Revelation	

28. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.16, in *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Christian Frederick Cruse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 195. Eusebius seems to be quoting an apologist for church orthodoxy.

29. Several comments are called for: (1) In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 19.6, Origen referred to the second chapter of James and noted that the words are from “the letter bearing (the name of) James.” Some scholars have taken this to be an indication of Origen’s doubt about the letter’s canonicity. This view, however, is wrong. Origen referred to the letter as Scripture in *Selection on Psalms*, 30.6, and called James “the apostle” in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, frag. 126. (2) The placement of 2 Peter is in doubt because of conflicting evidence. On one hand, Origen quoted Peter at

least six times in his writings and seemed to consider the letter to be canonical. For example, he spoke of Peter sounding aloud with the two trumpets of his letters (*Homilies on Joshua*, 7.1). On the other hand, according to a comment by Eusebius, Origen believed that “Peter, upon whom the church of Christ is built, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail, has left one epistle undisputed. Suppose, also, the second was left by him, for on this there is some doubt.” Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.25, in Cruse, *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History*, 246. (3) Origen seemed to consider Jude to be canonical (“filled with words of heavenly grace”; *Commentary on Matthew*, 10.17), but he acknowledged that the writing was not received as such by all the churches (*ibid.*, 30).

In the early part of the fourth century, Eusebius divided his classification of biblical books into four categories:<sup>30</sup>

<b>Eusebius's Canon (Early Fourth Century)</b>			
<i>Accepted books</i>	<i>Disputed books</i> (yet known to most)	<i>Spurious works</i>	<i>Absurd works</i> (heretical works)
The four Gospels	James	<i>Acts of Paul</i>	<i>Gospel of Peter</i>
Acts of the Apostles	2 Peter	<i>Shepherd of Hermas</i>	<i>Gospel of Thomas</i>
13 letters of Paul	2 and 3 John	<i>Didache</i>	<i>Gospel of Matthias</i>
1 John	Jude	<i>Letter of Barnabas</i>	<i>Acts of Andrew</i>
1 Peter		<i>Revelation of Peter</i>	<i>Acts of John</i>
Revelation of John (may be spurious)		<i>Gospel according to the Hebrews</i>	<i>Acts of others</i>
		Revelation of John (may be accepted)	

It should be clear that nearly all of the New Testament writings that we consider canonical were viewed similarly by the early church: the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen letters of the apostle Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and (at least in many circles) the Revelation of John. Several writings that are now considered canonical—James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Hebrews—were on the “fringe” of the early church’s canon.

- *James*. Being certain of the author of this letter has been a difficulty: Was it James the apostle, James the half brother of Jesus, or some other James of the early church? Also, its Jewish-Christian address (“To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations [the Diaspora]”) and flavor rendered it less attractive to the largely Gentile churches.
- *2 Peter*. Although it claimed to be authored by the apostle, so did several other writings (the Acts of Peter, the Revelation of Peter) that were clearly not to be placed with the canonical writings. Thus, some churches hesitated to accept it.
- *2 and 3 John*. These letters were so brief and seemingly unimportant that the church easily overlooked them; citations from these in early writings are very scarce. Determining authorship was also a problem with these letters.

30. Several comments are in order: (1) Although Eusebius placed the letter of James among the “disputed books,” he held that it was canonical. This placement, therefore, was due to his recognition that some churches had doubts about the letter’s canonicity. (2) Regarding 2 Peter, Eusebius noted that “one of his epistles called the first is acknowledged as genuine. For this was anciently used by the ancient fathers in their writings, as an undoubted work of the apostle. But that which is called

the second, we have not, indeed, understood to be embodied with the sacred books . . . yet as it appeared useful to many, it was studiously read with the other Scriptures. . . . These, however, are those that are called Peter’s epistles, of which I have understood only one epistle to be genuine, and admitted by the ancient fathers.” *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.3, in Cruse, *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History*, 83.

Both begin with the writer designating himself as “the elder.” At least some in the early church took this person to be someone other than John the apostle. Attributed to some unknown “John the elder” and thus lacking apostolic authority, the two letters failed to pass a key test for inclusion in the canon.

- *Jude*. Questions about Jude’s canonical status arose because of its citations from extrabiblical sources (Jude 9 quotes *The Assumption of Moses*, and Jude 14 cites *1 Enoch*).
- *Hebrews*. Inclusion or exclusion of this letter was tied to its association with the apostle Paul. Some of the churches (primarily those in the East) attributed it to Paul or at least found Pauline thoughts behind the non-Pauline style. This secured its place in the biblical canon for those churches. Other churches (primarily those in the West) disputed this Pauline authorship or association and thus excluded Hebrews from their canon.<sup>31</sup>

Still other writings were on the margins of the early church’s canon but ultimately were not included in the New Testament. The *Letter of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Didache* (or the *Teaching [of the Twelve Apostles]*), and several other works appeared with some consistency in some of the lists of canonical writings. The church eventually recognized that none of these passed the tests of apostolicity and antiquity, and thus they could not be part of the canonical Scriptures composing the New Testament.

The first appearance of a list of New Testament writings that corresponds exactly with the canon as is known today was Athanasius’s *Thirty-ninth (Easter) Letter* in AD 367.<sup>32</sup> After setting forth the list of the canonical Old Testament books, Athanasius presented this New Testament canon:<sup>33</sup>

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31. Pantaeus and Clement of Alexandria considered Paul to be the author of Hebrews. According to Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* (6.14), Clement believed that the letter “was written by Paul, to the Hebrews, in the Hebrew tongue; but that it was carefully translated by Luke, and published among the Greeks.” Apparently, Clement developed this view from Pantaeus: “But now as the blessed presbyter [i.e., Pantaeus] used to say, ‘since the Lord who was the apostle of the Almighty was sent to the Hebrews, Paul by reason of his inferiority, as if sent to the Gentiles, did not subscribe himself an apostle of the Hebrews; both out of reverence for the Lord, and because he wrote of his abundance to the Hebrews, as a herald and apostle of the Gentiles.’” Cruse, *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History*, 234. Origen nuanced this view: “But I would say that the thoughts are the apostle’s but the dictation [writing style] and phraseology belong to someone who has recorded what the apostle said, and as one who noted down at his leisure what his master dictated. If, then, any church considers this epistle as coming from Paul, let it be commended for this, for neither did those ancient men [i.e., the church fathers] deliver it as such without cause. But who it was that really wrote the

epistle, God only knows.” *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.25, in Cruse, *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History*, 246–47.

32. Athanasius, *Thirty-ninth Letter*, 3, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 4:551–52. As bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, Athanasius had the responsibility to determine the date of Easter each year. To communicate his decision, Athanasius wrote letters to the churches. It was in his Easter letter of AD 367 that he undertook the task of spelling out the canon of Scripture. His introduction underscored the seriousness of his task: “In proceeding to make mention of these things, I shall adopt, to commend my undertaking, the pattern of Luke the Evangelist, saying on my own account: ‘Forasmuch as some have taken in hand,’ to reduce into order for themselves the books termed apocryphal, and to mix them up with the divinely inspired Scriptures, concerning which we have been fully persuaded, as they who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word, delivered to the fathers; it seemed good to me also, having been urged thereto by true brothers, and having learned from the beginning, to set before you the books included in the canon, and handed down, and accredited as divine.”

33. *Ibid.*, 5, 7, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 4:552.



<b>Athanasius's Canon (367)</b>		
<i>Canonical writings</i>	<i>Canonical writings (cont.)</i>	<i>Noncanonical writings</i>
<i>Four Gospels</i>	<i>Fourteen letters of Paul</i>	<i>Wisdom of Solomon</i>
Matthew	Romans	<i>Wisdom of Sirach</i>
Mark	1 and 2 Corinthians	Esther
Luke	Galatians	<i>Judith</i>
John	Ephesians	<i>Tobit</i>
	Philippians	<i>Didache</i>
Acts of the Apostles	Colossians	<i>Shepherd of Hermas</i>
	1 and 2 Thessalonians	
<i>Seven general letters</i>	Hebrews	
James	1 and 2 Timothy	
1 and 2 Peter	Titus	
1, 2, and 3 John	Philemon	
Jude		
	Revelation of John	

Although the seven general letters were placed before the Pauline letters, and the letter to the Hebrews was included in the Pauline writings, no other differences existed between Athanasius's canon and the New Testament as we read it today. As for the noncanonical writings, Athanasius explained that they are "not indeed included in the canon, but are appointed by the fathers to be read by those who newly join us and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness."<sup>34</sup> They were merely read by new believers in the church for further progress in the faith and were not part of the canon of Scripture.

Athanasius's New Testament canon was officially endorsed by the Council of Hippo in AD 393. Now Paul's writings (which do not include Hebrews) appeared before the general letters: "The canonical Scriptures . . . of the New Testament: Four books of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles (one book), thirteen letters of Paul the apostle, one of the same to the Hebrews, two of Peter, three of John, one of James, one of Jude, the Revelation of John."<sup>35</sup> Two other important church meetings endorsed this same list: the Third Council of Carthage in 397 and the Fourth Council of Carthage in 419.<sup>36</sup> The church—both Catholic and Protestant—has recognized this canon ever since.

Although the canon of the New Testament has remained unchanged since the latter part of the fourth century, that is not the case with the Old Testament canon. Developments in the fifth century led to the insertion of other writings into the list of books

34. Ibid., 7, in *NPNF<sup>2</sup>*, 4:552. Athanasius added one more category of writings: the apocryphal books. Since these were "an invention of heretics," they were to be avoided completely.

35. The Council of Hippo, canon 36; cited in James J.

Megivern, *Bible Interpretation* (Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath, 1978), 48.

36. The Third Council of Carthage, canon 47; the Fourth Council of Carthage, canon 29.



recognized by the church as divinely inspired and authoritative. Beginning in the third century before Christ, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was undertaken.<sup>37</sup> The term *Septuagint* (seventy) became attached to this Greek translation; it is often noted by the Roman numerals LXX. This Bible became widely circulated among Greek-speaking Jews, and as the church expanded into Gentile areas, the LXX became its Old Testament.

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### The Septuagint (LXX)

- The first division:
  - Genesis
  - Exodus
  - Leviticus
  - Numbers
  - Deuteronomy
- The second division:
  - Joshua
  - Judges
  - Ruth
  - The Book of Four Kingdoms: 1 and 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings
  - Paraleipomena (literally, “things left over”): 1 and 2 Chronicles
  - 1 Esdras: a variant account of 2 Chronicles 35:1–Nehemiah 8:12
  - Esther: considerably expanded with a preface, a conclusion, three additional narrative sections at 3:13; 4:17; 8:12, and one additional sentence at 9:19
  - Judith: a godly, beautiful, and resourceful woman defeats the arrogant enemies of Israel
  - Tobit: an obedient son receives miraculous help from an angel
- The third division:
  - Psalms: expanded to include Psalm 151
  - Proverbs
  - Ecclesiastes
  - Song of Songs
  - Job
  - The Book of Wisdom (or The Wisdom of Solomon): a writing in praise of wisdom, and the story of Israel’s earliest history and the exodus told from the viewpoint of Wisdom

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37. Fanciful legends became associated with the translation process: Seventy or seventy-two Jews were supposedly brought to Alexandria, Egypt, for this work. Although isolated from one another in separate cells, they produced identical translations (of the Pentateuch; later legends claimed they did the entire Hebrew Bible) in seventy-two days! One such

legend is found in the *Letter of Aristeas*. Moreover, the Jewish philosopher Philo, from Alexandria, Egypt, claimed that all the translators wrote the same words “as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them.” Philo, *Life of Moses*, 2.7.37, in *The Works of Philo Judaeus*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (London: H. G. Bohn, 1854, repr. 1993), bk. 25.

Ecclesiasticus (or Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach): a guide to wise and virtuous living, and a eulogy of great Old Testament saints

- The fourth division:
  - The twelve Minor Prophets
  - Jeremiah
  - Lamentations
  - Baruch: a prayer, a poem about wisdom, and a prophecy of Israel's future hope
  - Letter of Jeremiah: a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles, warning against idolatry
  - Daniel: with The Song of the Three Children (the prayer of Azariah/Abednego in the midst of the fire, and the song of Daniel's three friends in the furnace) at 3:23; The History of Susanna (a victim of false accusations is rescued by Daniel's wisdom) as chapter 13; and Bel and the Dragon (Daniel exposes false gods) as chapter 14
- Appendix
  - 1 and 2 Maccabees: a history of Jewish revolts in the second century BC

The Septuagint is more extensive than Hebrew Scripture, and its additions are called the *apocryphal* (or hidden) *writings*, or the *Apocrypha* for short. The writers of the New Testament were familiar with the Septuagint and indeed used it as the source for a number of their citations of the Old Testament. However, at no point did they quote from the apocryphal writings; at best they may have alluded to them. The earliest list of “the books of the old covenant” that the church drew up (AD 170) included all the books of Hebrew Scripture with the exception of Esther, but it did not include any of the apocryphal writings.<sup>38</sup> This practice continued into the third century with Origen (though he included the apocryphal Letter of Jeremiah in his Old Testament canon) and into the fourth century with Athanasius (though he included the Letter of Jeremiah and Baruch in his canonical list).

Beginning in the second century after Christ, a Latin translation of the entire Bible was undertaken, reflecting the shift from Greek to Latin as the universal language of the Roman Empire. The version of the Old Testament originally translated was the Septuagint, not the Hebrew Bible. As the church began to adopt Latin as its language, the Latin translation *including the Apocrypha* became its Bible. In 382 the bishop of Rome invited Jerome to embark on a new Latin translation of the Bible. As he commenced his work on the Old Testament, Jerome realized that a proper translation required a Hebrew original and not the Greek Septuagint. Thus, he began to translate from the Hebrew Bible and had to confront the obvious differences between it and the Septuagint.

Jerome first translated Samuel and Kings, and in his preface to these books he composed a list of canonical Scripture. It included only the writings in the Hebrew Bible;

38. The list appeared in a letter from Melito, the bishop of Sardis, to his friend Onesimus and was preserved by Eusebius

in his *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.26. See Cruse, *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 164.

these alone were Scripture. He then commented: “This preface to the Scriptures may serve as a ‘helmeted’ [general] introduction to all the books which we turn [translate] from Hebrew into Latin, so that we may be assured that what is not found in our list must be placed among the apocryphal writings.”<sup>39</sup> These were Wisdom (of Solomon), the Book of Jesus Ben Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Judith, Tobit, and 1 and 2 Maccabees.<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere, Jerome indicated his rejection of Baruch, and though he did translate the additional stories in Daniel of the LXX, he placed them in an appendix to the book. Thus, he relegated the Apocrypha to secondary status in comparison with canonical Scripture.

In commenting on two of the apocryphal writings (Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus), Jerome indicated the role or purpose of the Apocrypha: “As then the church reads Judith, Tobit, and the books of Maccabees, but does not admit them among the canonical Scriptures, so let it read these two volumes for the edification of the people, not to give authority to doctrines of the church.”<sup>41</sup> That is, the church could read the apocryphal writings for its growth, but they could not be consulted in the establishment of church doctrine. (This function for the Apocrypha, as Jerome conceived it, will be invoked later by the Reformers as the question of the canon of Scripture is reopened over a millennium later in the sixteenth century.)<sup>42</sup>

Jerome exerted an immense influence through his Latin translation of the Bible, called the *Latin Vulgate*.<sup>43</sup> We might anticipate that his attitude toward the Apocrypha became the prevailing view in the church, but this was not the case. One of his contemporaries, Augustine, exercised an even greater influence on the church’s perspective toward the apocryphal writings.

The foundation of Augustine’s view toward the canon of Scripture was his belief that “one and the same Spirit” had spoken through both the writers of the Hebrew Scripture and the translators of the Septuagint. Even when the two versions differed significantly, the Spirit’s work of inspiration had been active in both. This must have been the case, because the apostles cited both the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint. If the founders of the church held this view, it must continue to be Augustine’s view—and thus the church’s view—of Scripture: “I also, according to my capacity, following the footsteps of the apostles, who themselves have quoted prophetic testimonies from both, that is, from the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, have thought that both should be used as authoritative, since both are one and divine.”<sup>44</sup> In a series of letters between them, Augustine urged Jerome to translate the Old Testament into Latin from the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew.<sup>45</sup> As Jerome included translations of the apocryphal writings in his Latin

39. Jerome, *Preface to the Books of Samuel and Kings*, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 6:490. He described the contents of the Old Testament in his letter to Paulinus (*Letter* 53), dated 394. Again, he made no mention of the apocryphal writings.

40. *Ibid.* He also included the *Shepherd of Hermas* in this list of Old Testament Apocrypha, but it is out of place; it should be listed as a New Testament apocryphal writing. For the sake of simplicity and so as not to confuse, I have left it out of his list.

41. Jerome, *Preface to the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 6:492.

42. See later discussion.

43. The name *Vulgate* became the common way of referring to Jerome’s translation in the sixteenth century. E. F. Sutcliffe, “Jerome,” in G. W. H. Lampe, ed., *The West from the Fathers to the Reformation*, vol. 2, *Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), 80–101 (esp. 99).

44. Augustine, *The City of God*, 18.43–44, in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup>, 2:386–87.

45. Augustine, *Letter* 28.2; *Letter* 71, in *NPNF*<sup>1</sup>, 1:251; 1:326–28. Jerome, *Letter* 105; *Letter* 112, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 6:189, 214.

Vulgate, these became widely known. The church had previously looked to the Hebrew Bible for its canon of the Old Testament. As the Vulgate became the new Bible of the church, however, the Apocrypha was regarded as part of canonical Scripture.

The Council of Hippo in 393, the Third Council of Carthage in 397, and the Fourth Council of Carthage in 419 all ratified the canon of Augustine.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the Old Testament with the Apocrypha (composed of Tobit, Judith, additions to Esther, 1 and 2 Maccabees, the Book of Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and additions to Daniel), together with the New Testament canon described above, would be the Scripture of the church. This view would go without significant challenge until the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

## THE CANON IN THE MIDDLE AGES

For over a millennium, the church pressed on with the Latin Vulgate—consisting of the Old Testament with the Apocrypha and the New Testament—as its Bible. Two major developments arose during the medieval period that would eventually result in reopening the question of what writings legitimately belong in the canon of Scripture.

The first of these developments<sup>47</sup> was the elevation of the Roman Catholic Church to possess supreme authority—an authority that was even greater than that of Scripture. This development led to the claim that the Roman Catholic Church possessed the authority to determine the canon of Scripture. As Guido Terreni affirmed: “From the church’s authority the canonical books derive their power of authority. Through the church the books of the Bible were accepted as authoritative. On her [the church’s] authority the faithful firmly believe that they [the canonical Scriptures] infallibly contain the truth. That we must firmly believe in them can be proved only on the basis of the church’s authority.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, according to Gabriel Biel: “The truth that holy mother church defines or accepts as catholic is to be believed with the same veneration as if it were expressed in Holy Scripture.”<sup>49</sup> Because the Catholic Church had defined the canon of Scripture, its determination of the canon had to be embraced by all Christians.

A second development was the rise of the important movement called *humanism* in the latter half of the Middle Ages. This movement should not be confused with the secular humanism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a secularizing ethos that is largely anti-Christian in nature. The humanism of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries was primarily a cultural and educational movement focused on promoting eloquence in speaking and writing.<sup>50</sup> Born in the Italian Renaissance and extending to northern Europe, humanism was not anti-Christian but was embraced by many leading figures in the church.

Humanism’s motto was “*ad fontes*”: “back to the sources.” For the church, this meant a return to its foundational writings: the Hebrew Old Testament, the Greek New Testament,

46. Council of Hippo, canon 36. Megivern, *Bible Interpretation*, 48. Cf. Third Council of Carthage, canon 47; Fourth Council of Carthage, canon 29.

47. Recounted in more detail in chap. 4.

48. Guido Terreni, *Questio de Magisterio Infallibili*, in Tavard, 32.

49. Gabriel Biel, *In Defense of Apostolic Obedience*, 1, in Pelikan, 3:125.

50. For an excellent introduction to humanism, see Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), 39–65.

and the works of the early church. This led to several developments and questions: First, the difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Latin Vulgate, which included the Apocrypha, became evident once again. The question arose anew: Should the church's Old Testament be based on the shorter Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint with its additional apocryphal writings?

Second, Jerome's ancient distinction between canonical and apocryphal writings was revived. The translator of the Vulgate had urged that the Apocrypha could be read "for the edification of the people" but could not be used "to give authority to doctrines of the church."<sup>51</sup> The church could appeal to canonical Scripture alone to establish its doctrine. Augustine had blurred this distinction, and thus the church, following his influence, had established certain beliefs and practices on the authority of apocryphal writings. For example, the classic proof text for the belief in purgatory and the practice of praying for the dead was 2 Maccabees 12:38–45. The question arose: Should the church continue to base its beliefs and practices on the Apocrypha, or should canonical Scripture alone be used to establish them?

Third, a comparison of the Latin translation with the Greek New Testament revealed that the Vulgate was a poor rendering of the original in certain places. This discovery was particularly important for several passages, because certain church beliefs and practices were based on the Latin version. For example, the Vulgate version of Jesus' evangelistic preaching (Matt. 4:17) had "do penance." This command of the Lord was used as the biblical foundation of the church's sacrament of penance, a means of receiving God's grace after sinning by praying, giving to the poor, forgoing certain physical pleasures, and so forth. Erasmus, a leading humanist scholar, insisted that the Greek should be translated "repent," a strong call to an inner change of heart rather than an external, church-imposed practice. The question arose: Should the church base its beliefs and practices from the New Testament on the poorly translated Latin Vulgate, or should it appeal to the original Greek text?

## THE CANON IN THE REFORMATION AND POST-REFORMATION

The Reformers, influenced by humanism, followed these developments and responded to these questions in the following way: First, the church's Old Testament should be based on the shorter Hebrew Bible, not on the Septuagint with its additional apocryphal writings. This decision was based on the fact that Jewish Scripture, with its twenty-two (or twenty-four) books, had been the Word of God used by Jesus and the disciples; thus, that shorter version must be considered the Bible of the church. Also, some of the apocryphal writings included incorrect historical or chronological information, and many of them had not been considered sound by the early church.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the Reformers dismissed the Apocrypha from the canonical Old Testament.

51. Jerome, *Preface to the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, in *NPNF*<sup>2</sup>, 6:492.

52. E.g., Luther rejected 1 Maccabees and the additions to Esther and Daniel because they did not appear in the Hebrew Bible. He dismissed Judith and Tobit for their inaccurate his-

torical accounts and Baruch for its chronological inconsistencies. He rejected the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus because of their lack of support in the early church. Martin Luther, *Prefaces to the Apocrypha*, *LW*, 35:337–54.

Second, adopting Jerome's classical distinction, the Reformers urged that the church could appeal to canonical Scripture alone to establish its beliefs and practices. Because the Apocrypha was noncanonical, it could not be used as the basis of church doctrine. This meant that belief in purgatory and the practice of praying for the dead were without *biblical* support and should be discontinued. At least for some of the Reformers, however, the Apocrypha was not worthless. Martin Luther said that Judith was "a fine, good, holy, useful book, well worth reading by us Christians."<sup>53</sup> He also praised the Wisdom of Solomon: "It pleases me beyond measure that the author here extols the Word of God so highly and ascribes to the Word all the wonders God has performed, both on enemies and in his saints."<sup>54</sup> Thus, the reading of the Apocrypha was encouraged, but the establishment of church doctrine on its authority was discouraged. The Reformers returned to Jerome's distinction and championed it.

Third, the Reformers urged that, just as the church's Old Testament should be based on the Hebrew Bible, so its New Testament should be based on the original Greek. Where the church's beliefs and practices were based on the poorly translated Latin Vulgate, they must be modified or abolished. Thus, when Luther sparked the Reformation with his Ninety-five Theses, posted on the door of the university church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517, he opened with these two points:

- When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.
- This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.<sup>55</sup>

In his explanation of these points, Luther appealed to "the Greek word *metanoieite* itself, which means 'repent' and could be translated more exactly by the Latin *transmentamini*, which means 'assume another mind and feeling, recover one's senses, make a transition from one state of mind to another, have a change of spirit.'"<sup>56</sup> This discovery began a process that culminated in Luther's dismissal of penance as a sacrament of the church.<sup>57</sup> More importantly, it established that the foundation for the church's canonical New Testament had to be the original Greek and not the Latin Vulgate.

Over against the medieval period's elevation of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformers rejected its claim to possess authority over Scripture. The formal principle of Protestantism was *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone. Among other things, this meant "the holy, biblical Scripture, because it is the Word of God, has standing and credibility enough in and of itself."<sup>58</sup> Thus, the Bible does not require the church to confer authority on it. For the issue of canonicity, this meant the church did not *establish* the canon of Scripture. Indeed, John Calvin offered a biting critique of this position,<sup>59</sup> challenging the Roman Catholic hierarchy to demonstrate that the church was the one

53. Ibid., 339.

54. Ibid., 343.

55. *The Ninety-five Theses*, LW, 31:25–33.

56. *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, LW, 31:83–84.

57. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, LW, 36:5–126.

58. Heinrich Bullinger, *The Opposition of Evangelical and Papal Doctrine*, 1.A.1 (Zurich, 1551), in Pelikan, 4:208.

59. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.9.14, LCC, 2:1178–79.

that had fixed the canon of Scripture.<sup>60</sup> Quoting Paul, Calvin affirmed that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20); thus, Scripture preceded the church, and it cannot owe its existence to church authority.<sup>61</sup> The church *recognized* and *affirmed* the divinely inspired writings that God intended for placement in the canon, but it did not *create* or *determine* the canon of Scripture.

How, then, does the church know canonical Scripture? Calvin pointed to “the secret testimony of the Spirit” and Scripture’s own “clear evidence of its own truth”:<sup>62</sup>

Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated.... And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit.... Therefore, illumined by his 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.<sup>63</sup>

Both the Holy Spirit and Scripture itself attest to canonical Scripture, which consists of the Old Testament based on the Hebrew Bible, not the Septuagint, and the New Testament. Thus, the apocryphal writings must be excluded from the canon.

The Protestant confessions underscored this. For example, the *French Confession of Faith* of 1559, after listing the Old and New Testament canonical books, stated: “We know these books to be canonical and the sure rule of our faith not so much by the common accord and consent of the church as by the testimony and inward illumination of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we can not found any articles of faith.”<sup>64</sup> The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, after listing the canonical writings, added: “The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, not to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, the Protestant Church embraced sixty-six books in its canonical Scripture and rejected the Apocrypha.<sup>66</sup>

60. Ibid., 1.7.3, LCC, 1:76–78.

61. Ibid., 1.7.2, LCC, 1:75–76. This was Luther’s point as well: “Scripture is the womb from which arises divine truth and the church.” *First Lectures on the Psalms*, LW, 10:397.

62. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.7.4; 1.7.2, LCC, 1:78, 76.

63. Ibid., 1.7.5, LCC, 1:80.

64. John Calvin and Antoine de la Roche Chandieu, *Gallican Confession*, art. 4, in Schaff, 3:361–62. Similarly, Guy de Bray’s *Belgic Confession* (1561), after listing the canonical Scriptures, added: “We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, whence they carry the evidence in themselves.” *Belgic Confes-*

*sion*, art. 5–6, in Schaff, 3:386–87.

65. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.2–3. Similarly, the *Belgic Confession*, speaking of the apocryphal writings, noted: “All which the church may read and take instruction from, so far as they agree with the canonical books; but they are far from having such power and efficacy as that we may from their testimony confirm any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less to detract from the authority of the other sacred books.” *Belgic Confession*, art. 6, in Schaff, 3:387.

66. The celebrated case of Martin Luther’s problem with the letter of James was not at all typical of Protestantism in general. He called it “an epistle of straw” (LW, 35:362) and threatened, “Away with James. I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove....” (LW, 34:317). Actually, Luther placed Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the end of his New Testament because he had strong doubts about their apostolicity.



The Roman Catholic Church reacted to this Protestant rejection of the Apocrypha at the Council of Trent. It sought to correct the Protestant “errors” by reaffirming the Catholic canon of Scripture, which included the apocryphal writings. A conciliary decree gave this warning: “If anyone does not receive, as sacred and canonical, these books, with all their parts, as they have been read in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate edition, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the above mentioned traditions, let him be anathema [cursed].”<sup>67</sup> Thus, Protestants were threatened with church condemnation for using a Bible without the Apocrypha.

Despite these threats, the Protestant churches continued to insist on a canonical Scripture that did not contain the Apocrypha.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the authority of these canonical writings was derived from three important yet unequally weighted sources: “The Scripture . . . has its canonical authority chiefly from the Holy Spirit, by whose impulse and inspiration it was brought forth; thereafter from the writers to whom God gave sure and special testimonies of the truth. After this it has authority from the primitive church as a witness at whose time these writings were published and approved.”<sup>69</sup> Beyond these three sources that confirm the canonicity of the biblical writings is the inner witness of the Holy Spirit himself to their canonical authority: “The canonical authority of Scripture, considered as to its doctrines, is proved by external and internal criteria, but especially by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit illuminating the minds of men, through the Scriptures attentively read or heard from the mouth of a teacher.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, the post-Reformers continued the defense of the Protestant canon of Scripture begun by Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers.

## THE CANON IN THE MODERN PERIOD

Generally speaking, this Protestant–Roman Catholic division of conviction as to what constitutes the canon of Scripture continues even to our day. Not to be overlooked, however, is their agreement that both the Old Testament and the New Testament compose the

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He also recognized the struggle waged in the early church for including these writings in the canon. Thus, he considered twenty-three books as “the true and certain chief books of the New Testament” while he relegated these four writings to a lower level. He denied that Paul was the author of Hebrews and found difficulty with some of its passages that seemed “contrary to all the gospels and to St. Paul’s epistles.” Not only did James lack apostolic authorship; it also failed the most crucial test: It did not “press Christ.” “All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate [German *treiben*: press, drive home] Christ. And that is the true test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ.” James also ran into conflict with the rest of the Bible: “It is flatly against St. Paul and all the rest of Scripture in ascribing justification to works (James 2:24).” Jude was found wanting in that “it is an extract or copy of St. Peter’s second epistle” and “cites sayings and incidents that are found

nowhere else in the Scriptures (Jude 9, 14).” Luther’s problems with Revelation stemmed from its lack of clarity: “The apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear and plain words. . . . For it befits the apostolic office to speak clearly of Christ and his deeds, without images and visions. . . . I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it.” *Prefaces to the New Testament*, LW, 35:394–99.

67. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 4th session (April 8, 1546), *Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures*, in Schaff, 2:80. The text has been rendered clearer.

68. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer, pt. 1, sec. 6 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 168–95.

69. *Ibid.*, 176.

70. David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum* (1707), 126, in Schmid, 84.



biblical canon. Occasionally in the early modern period, this agreement was challenged. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher relegated the Old Testament to secondary status. He noted the common consensus among Christians that a great difference exists between the Old and New Testaments, and he denied that Christian maturity could be helped even by the Prophets and the Psalms. He asserted that when Christians give heed to the Old Testament, their Christianity is infected with legalism and they can find little support for Christian doctrines. Furthermore, Schleiermacher denied that the use of the Old Testament by Christ and the apostles was a precedent set by them for Christians to follow; indeed, he spoke of the “gradual retirement” of the Old Testament as the New Testament appeared and proposed that “the real meaning of the facts would be clearer if the Old Testament followed the New as an appendix.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, for Schleiermacher, “the Old Testament Scriptures do not . . . share the normative dignity or the inspiration of the New.”<sup>72</sup> This denial of the canonicity of the Old Testament was exceptional, not normative.

The greatest challenges to the church’s historical understanding of the canon began with haste and intensity as the modern period progressed. With the rise of historical criticism came a thoroughgoing suspicion of the authorship of most biblical writings, leading to the demise of the traditional view of canonization. For example, Hugo Grotius doubted the authorship of 2 Peter by the apostle Peter and the authorship of Ecclesiastes by Solomon. Similarly, Baruch Spinoza (followed by Jean LeClerc and many others) argued against Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Also, the (alleged) division between the Bible and the Word of God, another key tenet of historical criticism, wreaked havoc with the traditional consensus. In his important work *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon* (1771–75), Johann Salomo Semler explained: “Holy Scripture and the Word of God are clearly to be distinguished, for we know the difference. . . . To Holy Scripture (using the particular historical expression that originated among the Jews) belong Ruth, Esther, the Song of Songs, etc., but not all the books that are called holy belong to the Word of God, which at all times makes all men wise unto salvation.”<sup>73</sup>

As historical criticism drove scholars in the direction of treating the Bible just like any other human book, the notion of the canonization of the biblical writings came to be viewed as a completely human action with a denial of any divine superintendence of the process. The seminal work in this regard was the *Introduction to the Old Testament* by Johann Gottfried Eichhorn.<sup>74</sup> Bemoaning the fact that the term *canon* had ever been used, Eichhorn approached the process of collecting the various writings of the Old Testament as a purely historical development. Many who have followed Eichhorn have accepted his basic premise and discussed the Old (and New) Testament canon as the result of a merely human effort.<sup>75</sup>

71. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928, repr. 1960), 610–11.

72. *Ibid.*, 608.

73. Johann Salomo Semler, *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon*, cited in David G. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. D. A.

Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986; Baker, 1995), 344–45.

74. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Introduction to the Old Testament), 3 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmanns, 1803).

75. A recent example of this trend is James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973, 1990), 118–20.

Standing against this tide, evangelicals echoed the traditional view of canonicity with some modifications. B. B. Warfield, for example, rehearsed the common Protestant view of the historical development by which the church recognized certain writings as being canonical. In particular, he affirmed that “in every case the principle on which a book was accepted, or doubts against it laid aside, was the historical tradition of apostolicity.”<sup>76</sup> Yet Warfield expressed a novel notion of apostolicity: it should not be understood to refer to the *writing* of New Testament canonical books by the apostles, but instead to the *determination* of the exact canon of Scripture by the apostles themselves.<sup>77</sup>

Employing a salvation-historical approach to the canonicity of Scripture, Herman Ridderbos began his discussion with a presupposition of faith in Jesus Christ and his delegation of authority to the apostles, the foundation of his church: “The authority of God is in no way limited to his mighty works in Jesus Christ, but ... it also extends to their proclamation in the words and writings of those who have been especially appointed as the authorized bearers and instruments of divine revelation. The written tradition established by the apostles, in analogy with the writings of the Old Testament, thereby acquires the significance of being the foundation and standard of the future church.”<sup>78</sup> From this presupposition of christological and apostolic authority flows the principle of christological and apostolic priority in discussions of the canon: Jesus Christ authorized the apostles to be his witnesses and to write the authoritative foundational documents on which the church was founded. Thus, “the canon in its redemptive historical sense is not the product of the church; rather the church itself is the product of the canon.”<sup>79</sup> A second key principle that flows from this presupposition is that the canon is closed.<sup>80</sup>

As historical criticism grew, and with it the historical-critical approach to the canon of Scripture, opposition to it arose. Of particular note is the *canon consciousness* set forth by Brevard Childs. As far as this historical-critical approach to the Old Testament goes, Childs offered three biting critiques. The first focused on its misplaced emphasis on the history of Hebrew literature rather than the canonical text itself.<sup>81</sup> The second criticized the historical-critical approach’s failure to see the role of canonical Scripture in Israel’s life.<sup>82</sup> The final criticism pointed to the approach’s disregard of any and all religious factors that influenced the shaping of the Old Testament canon. For Childs, rather, “It

76. B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1948), 415.

77. “Let it be clearly understood that it was not exactly apostolic *authorship* which in the estimation of the earliest churches, constituted a book a portion of the ‘canon’.... From the beginning it was not so. The principle of canonicity was not apostolic authorship, but *imposition by the apostles as ‘law.’*” Ibid.

78. Herman Ridderbos, *The Authority of the New Testament Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963), 27. My discussion of Ridderbos follows the contours of David Dunbar’s presentation in “Biblical Canon,” 352–55.

79. Ridderbos, *Authority of the New Testament Scriptures*, 27.

80. Ridderbos’s presuppositional approach did not over-

look the complex and at times halting process by which the biblical canon came into existence. Still, he ultimately emphasized the divine promise of Jesus to build his church upon the apostolic confession (Matt. 16:18) as key to understanding rightly this historical development: “The absoluteness of the canon is not to be separated from the relativity of history. It is true, however, that we shall have to view the history of the canon in the light of this a priori faith; and we shall view it as a history in which not only the power of human sin and error, but, above all, the promise of Christ works itself out, in order to build and to establish His church upon the testimony of the apostles.” Ibid., 41.

81. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 40.

82. Ibid.

is constitutive of Israel's history that the literature formed the identity of the religious community which in turn shaped the literature."<sup>83</sup> Childs extended this critique to New Testament canonical discussions influenced by historical criticism.<sup>84</sup> Moving beyond critique to a constructive proposal, Childs emphasized a canonical approach to Scripture that focuses biblical interpretation on the final, canonical form of the Old Testament and New Testament as those writings have been received by the church.<sup>85</sup>

The impact of Childs on evangelicals has been extensive. In particular, they have latched onto his emphasis on the final canonical form of the biblical text as the focus and justification for doing biblical theology.<sup>86</sup> But Childs has also influenced evangelical biblical scholars in their understanding of the development of the canon. For example, John Sailhamer, following Childs's lead, outlined three important developments leading to "the final shape" of the Old Testament:

- *Composition.* The notion of authorship represents a decisive moment in the history of a text. In this way of thinking about the final shape, composition is viewed neither in terms of a dynamic process nor a rigid status quo. The composition of a biblical book . . . represents a creative and decisive moment in the history of the text.
- *Canonization.* Canonization . . . looks at the point where a book becomes part of a larger collection and contributes to its overall shape. . . . This means that in classical terms of authorship, the shape of the OT canon as a whole must be taken seriously and integrated into our text model. Not only do the books of the Hebrew Bible have authors, but also the Hebrew Bible as a whole and as a canon is the product of composition and authorship.
- *Consolidation.* Here the issue is the further development of a canonical text within a community. . . . The notion of consolidation means that once texts become a part of a community, they take on essential characteristics of that community.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, Sailhamer attempted to work out the implications of Childs's groundbreaking work on canonical consciousness and apply those to an evangelical position on the development of the canon.

And so the evangelical movement today embraces various approaches to the issue of the canon. Representing a growing evangelical position, David Dunbar noted several important elements in a robust doctrine of the canonicity of Scripture. Like Ridderbos, Dunbar emphasized the christological or salvation-historical development of the

83. Ibid., 41.

84. Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), 21.

85. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 73; *New Testament as Canon*, 48. Childs was critiqued by James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 378–438.

86. An example of this is Paul House, whose *Old Testament*

*Theology* was, among other things, "devoted to the pursuit of the wholeness of the Old Testament message." Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 57.

87. John H. Sailhamer, "Biblical Theology and the Composition of the Hebrew Bible," in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002), 27–31.

canon: “The oral and written apostolic witness to Christ was that from which the primitive church drew its life. The process by which the written form of that witness rose to increasing prominence and was gradually defined in the canonical understanding of the church was both natural and spontaneous. The process was, to a great extent, under way before the Christian community was aware of its implications.”<sup>88</sup> As for the criteria for canonicity, Dunbar explained:

Broadly stated, the church regarded apostolicity as the qualifying factor for canonical recognition; however, this apostolicity should be understood not strictly in terms of authorship but in terms of content and chronology. That which was canon must embody the apostolic tradition, and this tradition was to be discerned in the most primitive documents: “the normative testimonies must derive from the period closest to Christ, namely that of Christian origins, the age of the apostles and their disciples.” The recognition of this apostolicity, moreover, was based primarily on the tradition of the church. Those books that had functioned authoritatively for earlier Christians were received as an authentic apostolic tradition.<sup>89</sup>

An important implication for canonical discussions today is that “the canon is in principle closed.”<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, for Dunbar, discussions of canonicity must move beyond historical considerations and include the affirmation of God’s providential work in the canonical process.<sup>91</sup> In conclusion, Dunbar affirmed, “The early Christians believed that they knew where to find the canon of Christ and the apostles. Today we still so believe.”<sup>92</sup> The importance that evangelicals attach to this issue can be seen in the fact that the theme of the 2008 Evangelical Theological Society national meeting was the canon of Scripture.<sup>93</sup>

In summary, the Protestant church, with its roots in the Reformation, and taking its clues from the early church, embraces a canon of thirty-nine Old Testament writings that do not include the Apocrypha and twenty-seven New Testament writings.

88. Dunbar, “Biblical Canon,” 357.

89. Ibid., 358. Dunbar cited Hans F. von Campenhausen, *Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 330.

90. Ibid., 358.

91. Ibid., 359.

92. Ibid., 360.

93. The plenary addresses appear in the following: Peter J. Gentry, “The Text of the Old Testament;” Stephen Dempster, “Canons on the Right and Canons on the Left: Finding a Resolution in the Canon Debate;” Daniel B. Wallace, “Challenges in New Testament Criticism for the Twenty-First Century,” and C. E. Hill, “The New Testament Canon: *Deconstructio ad Absurdum?*” *JETS* 52, no. 1 (March 2009): 19–119.

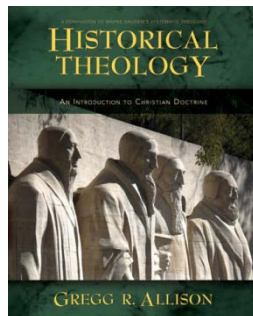
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