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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITION FOR THE FORMATION OF THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE question of the formation of the New Testament canon is a difficult one. In the case of the Old Testament we have the authority of Christ and his apostles. The Gospels and the apostolic epistles testify that the single books of the Old Testament and this Testament as a whole, were recognized by Christ himself as the word of God and that obliges us to accept them as such. But with the New Testament matters are quite different. We have no third volume to bear witness to the second, and, if we had, it would not help us, because the third would want a fourth and so *in infinitum*.

This difficulty disturbed the old fathers of the church and it was a point of much consideration and discussion between the learned men of our own age. One cannot say that there is a solution, which satisfies all who participated in the debate.

In ancient and modern times more than one defended the theory of the *notae canonicitatis*. That is to say, the church or its members would have had a certain number of characteristics, by which they were able to decide if a book was a genuine part of the New Testament, or not. Under the characteristics apostolic origin held the first place. But there were also some others, for example, the reading in the services and the tradition of the church.

Now, firstly, it is necessary to see that all such characteristics are quite insufficient. Take the four gospels. Two are written by an apostle, indeed. But the gospels of Mark and Luke are not of apostolic origin and to save apostolic origin as a characteristic of canonicity one is obliged to accept that the gospel of Luke is the gospel of Paul and the gospel of Mark that of Peter.

But there is a more serious objection against the theory of the *notae canonicitatis*. If we give to men the right to judge of the canon, we attack the essence of the canon. The canon is canon, because it has divine authority. The authority of the Lord we have to adore. We are obliged to submit ourselves to the canon. And everybody who judges the books of the

New Testament at a certain rate, has lost the idea of the canon. Therefore the theory of the *notae canonicitatis* is to be rejected.

The very characteristic of the canon as the infallible rule of God, given to men, claims belief of mankind and only belief. The confessions of the Reformed churches teach us that the scriptures do radiate their divinity. They are *autopistic* and it is the Spirit of the Lord, who gives faith to men, by which it is possible to see the *autopistia* and to believe that the Scriptures are the word of God. So Scripture has its authority in itself and no man can give it authority. In the Westminster Confession we read: "The Authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church; but wholly upon God (who is the Truth itself), the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."

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But the same Confession continues: "We may be moved and induced by the Testimony of the Church, to an high and reverent esteem of Holy Scripture." That is not to be forgotten. Also if we reject the theory of the *notae canonicitatis*, the material substance of what was accepted as *notae* is not left without any worth. This concerns especially the tradition of the church. I should like to write some lines to demonstrate the significance of this tradition for the formation of the canon.

It is a well-known fact that we find much about this tradition by some of the fathers at the end of the second century, for example by Irenaeus and Tertullian. We cannot assent to all these fathers wrote about the tradition. On the contrary, the fault of the Church of Rome begins in the days of Irenaeus and Tertullian, because they propagate the significance of the tradition not only in a formal sense, but also in a material. Irenaeus writes, *Adv. Haer.*, 3, 2, 2, of the heretics: "Quam autem ad eam iterum traditionem, quae est ab apostolis, quae per successiones presbyterorum in ecclesiis custoditur, provocamus eos, etc. . . . evenit itaque, neque scripturis iam neque traditioni consentire eos." It is evident that Irenaeus takes here the tradition in a material sense and that he puts it beside the scriptures. There are more such passages in Irenaeus. Also in Tertullian. To quote an example, I mention *De Praescr. haeret.*, 21: "Quid

autem (apostoli) praedicaverint, id est quid illis Christus revelaverit, et hic praescribam non aliter probari debere nisi per easdem ecclesias, quas ipsi apostoli condiderunt, ipsi eis praedicando tam viva, quod aiunt voce quam per epistolas postea. Si haec ita sunt, constat perinde omnem doctrinam, quae cum illis ecclesiis apostolicis matricibus et originalibus fidei conspiret veritati deputandum, id sine dubio tenentem quod ecclesiae ab apostolis, apostoli a Christo, Christus a Deo accepit."

It is upon this path of the tradition in the material sense that the Roman Catholic church has walked to the end and it holds until to-day the doctrine of a material tradition beside the scriptures, as it was finally appointed by the Council of Trent.

But our fathers, rejecting the Roman doctrine of Tradition, knew very well that not all tradition is to be disapproved. We can take Tradition in a formal sense, also the act of the *tradere* and in this sense the Reformers did not condemn Tradition. On the contrary they vindicated it as a precious good given by the Lord to the church. I will not quote now one of my countrymen, I will bring forward a passage of a Swiss theologian, who is in great honour even in our times in the Anglo-Saxon world. Franciscus Turretinus writes, *Instit. Theol. Elenct.*, I, 1688, p. 150: "Non quaeritur, An nullus unquam locus in Ecclesia fueri Traditionibus ἀγράφους. Fatemur enim Deum aliquando Verbo ἀγράφου Ecclesiam docuisse ut ante Mosem. . . . Non quaeritur, An aenes omnino Traditiones sunt absolute rejiciendae. Nam concedimus posse dari *Traditiones historicas* quae rerum gestarum mentionem continent."

The great man, however, who gave us a full exposition of the manner by which Protestants accept the tradition, is the Lutheran theologian, Martinus Chemnitz, in his book *Examen Concilii Tridentini*. His explanation is too ample to quote all he gives. I must confine myself to that part which is of interest for our subject. Chemnitz writes (ed. Francf. ad Moen, 1590, I, pp. 144 and 145): "Secundum genus traditionum est, quod libri Scripturae sacrae non interrupta serie temporum (sicut Augustinus loquitur) et certa connexionis successione, ab Ecclesia custoditi, et fideliter ad posteros transmissi, nobisque quasi per manus traditi sunt. Ita Origines dicit, se ἐν παραδόσει, per traditionem didicisse, quod quattuor Evangelia, in universa Ecclesia indubitata. Et Eusebius de libris canonicis disputans, aliquoties utitur verbis tradendi et accipiendi. Quae vero sit

ratio huius traditionis, hoc est ecclesiae testificantis de germanis et Canonicis Scripturae libris, supra fuse explicatum est, cum de libris canonicis ageremus. Et hanc traditionem qua nobis in manum dantur sacrae Scripturae libri, reverenter accipimus.”

I believe I have given enough to demonstrate that it is not against the opinion of the Reformers, when I give tradition a certain significance for the formation of the canon of the New Testament.

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I come now to the next part of my paper. In the New Testament itself we read that our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles gave a great place to a formal tradition for the preservation of the revelation of the new covenant.

Christ Himself said to the apostles before the ascension : “ But ye shall receive power, when the Holy Ghost is come upon you ; and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” It was the special task of the apostles to preach what they saw and heard, so they themselves saw their duty (Luke i. 2 ; Acts i. 22 ; etc. ; 1 John i. 1, *sqq.*). The Lord promised the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for the accomplishing of this task (John xiv. 26 ; xvi. 13). Here we have the beginning of the *παραδιδόναι* and the *παραλαμβάνειν*, which are of such interest for the first Christians (cf. for example, 1 Cor. xv. 1 *sqq.*).

Now we come to the books of the New Testament. When the apostles wrote their books, they took all precautions that the first readers knew with indubitable certainty they accepted a trustworthy book, an apostolic writing. Luke, in his prologue, declares that he is writing the matters even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. John writes in his gospel (xix. 35) : “ and he that hath seen hath borne witness, and his witness is true, and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye also may believe.” Paul commences the greater part of his epistles with the testimony that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ. 2 Thess. iii. 17 we read : “ The salutation of me Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle ; so I write.” There is a great number of texts of the same character. In the epistles of Paul (Phil. i. 12 *sqq.* ; 1 Thess. iii. 1 *sqq.*), but also in other books of the New Testament (1 Peter i. 1 ; 2 Peter i. 1 ; 1 John i. 1 *sqq.* ; Rev. i. 1 *sqq.* ; xxii. 18, 19). The result must have been that the different

churches knew positively that they received genuine apostolic writings, which had divine authority. And they accepted them believing they were the Word of God (1 Thess. ii. 13).

But the task of the churches is not only the *παραλαμβάνειν*, but also the *παραδιδόναι*. It is especially Paul, who takes care that his epistles not only are preserved by the churches, but also handed over to all those who are concerned (Col. iv. 16). "And when this epistle hath been read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye also read the epistle from Laodicea." 1 Thess. v. 27: "I adjure you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the brethren." 2 Tim. ii. 2: "And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

So we come to this result. The apostolic churches received the various books of the New Testament with the certainty of their genuine origin and their divine authority. In the same manner they handed their books over to others, to posterity, and so there arose a formal tradition that these and no others were the real divine books of the new dispensation. The churches each separately in the first time, the churches together in later days, were the guardians of the sacred books, the holders of the formal tradition about their origin and genuineness. So the churches of the New Covenant fulfilled the task, which was, according to Paul, the task of old Israel in the case of the books of the Old Testament. Rom. iii. 2: "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what is the profit of circumcision? Much every way: first of all, that they were intrusted with the oracles of God."

At the end of the second century we find an earnest investigation of the apostolic tradition. It was wrong of Irenaeus, Tertullian and others, that they considered apostolic origin as a *nota canonicitatis*. But they were right in their estimation of the apostolic tradition and in their opinion, that this tradition was a useful help in their struggle with heresy and for the discerning the really divine books from the apocryphal and heretical ones.

It is the Lord himself, who gave to His church the books of the new dispensation. It is He, who preserved these books and led His church to the confession, that these and no other books were inspired by the Holy Ghost. The authority of the book does not rest upon any authority of the church, but alone upon their inspiration. But amidst the many difficulties and

uncertainties, which arise partly by the unfaithfulness of the Christians, the Lord used the formal tradition of the church as one of the means, which promoted and advanced the general acceptance of the new canon. And so we can say that Tradition is a factor of significance in the formation of the canon of the New Testament.

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Now I foresee two objections against my suggestions. The first is this. Not all the books written by the apostles and handed over to the churches in the name of an apostle are accepted in the canon of the New Testament. 1 Cor. v. 9 we hear that there was an epistle of Paul sent to the Corinthians before our first. And secondly, among the apocryphal writings, there are some which claim to be of apostolic origin, for example the epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans. Nay, there are books accepted by the churches as divine (1 Clement, and the Pastor of Hermas), which in later times were rejected.

These objections, however, do not bring an argument against our theory. What I try to demonstrate is not, that every book which came to a church with the apostolic authority deserves a place in the canon, but that Tradition had significance for the formation of what is since the year 400 and in our times is the canon of the New Testament. How to explain the disappearance of apostolic writings is a question by itself, not that of my present paper.

And secondly, indeed, books that were not canonical were accepted by various churches. But even that is an argument for my theory. For it is also the tradition, living in the churches, which led to the right opinion that those books were to be rejected.

Finally, let nobody come to a wrong idea of my opinion. It was not my intention to explain that Tradition is the only, the great factor in the formation of the canon. I believe that God Himself gave the canon to the church and that He, and only He, took care that the church accepted the divinely inspired books as such. But this is my opinion: the Lord used the tradition of the church to secure the intended recognition of the canon.

F. W. GROSHEIDE.

Amsterdam.