

CORRELATION OF REVELATORY SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND NT CANONICITY

Robert L. Thomas
Professor of New Testament

Paul uses portions of three of his epistles to develop the role of spiritual gifts in building the body of Christ. Among the eighteen gifts he lists are four that provide for the impartation of special revelation necessary for the body's growth: the gifts of apostleship, prophecy, the word of wisdom, and the word of knowledge. In discussions of NT canonicity, apostleship has been prominent, but a study of relevant passages shows that prophecy also played an important part in furnishing the early church with special revelation. Several NT examples, particularly the Apocalypse, reinforce this observation. In their efforts to single out books for inclusion in the NT canon, early Christian leaders looked for the works that were inspired, narrowing their search by concentrating on works by men whose spiritual gifts capacities included apostleship and prophecy. A number of early Christian writings verify their interest, not just in apostolicity, but also in the propheticity of a writing. After narrowing down their possibilities to works authored by apostles and prophets, they applied tests of antiquity, orthodoxy, catholicity, and traditional usage to finalize their list of NT books.

* * * * *

In three of his epistles—Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians—the apostle Paul speaks of God's building of the body of Christ through spiritual gifts He bestows on individual believers. Among the eighteen gifts that Paul mentions, are several that provided for special revelation to the church, revelation that would complement the inspired data available to early Christians in the OT. The following discussion will explore how those revelatory gifts related to books of the NT canon that the church eventually identified.

First will come a brief explanation to identify the NT revelatory gifts of the Spirit, particularly those in addition to apostleship. A follow-up section will discuss several NT examples of revelatory gifts in action in the NT. After this will come a listing and discussion of tests of canonicity applied by the early church in their recognition of the NT canon. The second and third of the above sections will focus in particular on the

importance of the gift of prophecy.

REVELATORY SPIRITUAL GIFTS

The obvious starting point in correlating revelatory spiritual gifts and NT canonicity is the NT gift of apostleship. Apostolic authorship is the most widely cited test of canonicity, with some scholars going to the point of asserting that it is the only criterion. Harris has stated, ". . . The test of canonicity applied by the early church was apostolic authorship."¹ He concludes,

The view of the determining principle of the canon expressed previously may be summarized by saying that the canonicity of a book of the Bible depends upon its authorship. If the book was in the Old Testament, the people of the day accepted it because it was written by a prophet. If it was part of the New Testament, it was recognized as inspired if it had been written by an apostle—either by himself or with the help of an understudy or amanuensis.²

He cites extensive evidence from the NT itself to demonstrate the authoritative role of apostles.³ He concludes his discussion with these statements: "The Lord Jesus did not, in prophecy, give us a list of the twenty-seven New Testament books. He did, however, give us a list of the inspired authors [i.e., the apostles]."⁴ One can hardly debate the major role of the apostles in penning books of the NT and the recognition of the early church regarding the importance of that role in pinpointing books to take their places alongside the OT canon as authoritative Scripture.

Yet to limit the determination of canonicity to apostolic authorship alone is precarious. In speaking about Eph 4:11 and 1 Cor 12:28, Harris notes the first rank of apostles and the second ranking of prophets, and says, "The gift of prophecy was one which all Christians were to desire; the apostolate came directly from God."⁵ He observes later in comparing NT prophecy with OT prophecy that NT prophets held a lower status in the area of divine authority, indicating that tests of fulfilled predictions and miracles did not apply to them.⁶

This representation of the gift of prophecy is seriously misleading, however. For one thing, though the NT prophet did not have to pass tests of fulfilled predictions and miracles, he did have to pass the test of discern-

¹R. Laird Harris, "Preface," in *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures* (Greenville, S. C.: A Press, 1995) 3.

²Ibid., 285.

³Ibid., 234-47.

⁴Ibid., 247.

⁵Ibid., 241.

⁶Ibid., 245.

ings of spirits in the presence of his fellow prophets (1 Cor 12:10; 14:29).⁷ Also, the context of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 shows quite clearly that God sovereignly bestows all gifts of the Spirit according to His will and not according to human quests and desires. First Corinthians 12:11 describes the source of gifts this way: "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to every single person just as He wills." And 1 Cor 12:18 confirms, "But now God on His part has placed the members, each one of them, in the body just as He desired." Prophecy was not "up for grabs" among the members of Christ's body. Harris apparently has mistakenly understood 1 Cor 12:31 to convey that sense, but the command to be zealous for the greater gifts was a command for the corporate local body to seek the greater gifts for itself, not for each individual Christian to do so for himself or herself. First Corinthians 14:29-31 clarifies that only a limited number had that gift in the Corinthian church. The last passage also shows that whatever authority the prophetic gift possessed was subject to the authority of Paul, who as an apostle had the authority to direct its usage.⁸

Apostleship was not the only revelatory gift among those named in Pauline epistles. Prophecy was another, along with two others that seemed to have overlapped or to have been somewhat interchangeable with apostleship and prophecy. Those were the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge (1 Cor 12:8).⁹ The replacement of wisdom and knowledge by apostleship and prophecy at the head of the lists of 1 Cor 12:28-29 furnishes strong implications regarding close relationships between the two pairs of gifts.¹⁰ Several lines of reasoning affirm the revelational character of these three nonapostolic gifts: prophecy, the word of wisdom, and the word of knowledge.

(1) Prophecy's close association with apostleship requires its inclusion in the revelational category. Twice in 1 Cor 12:28-29 the gift follows immediately after the apostolic gift as being the second-most profitable in edifying the church. In Eph 4:11 it again takes second place after apostles in a listing of gifted persons who contributed to building up

⁷Robert L. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts, An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 12—14* (Chicago: Moody, 1978) 44-45, 153, 226-27 n. 25.

⁸N. B. Stonehouse, "The Authority of the New Testament," in *The Infallible Word*, N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., 3rd rev. printing (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 115-16.

⁹Charles Hodge is among those who define "the word of wisdom" as the avenue adopted by the Holy Spirit in imparting revelations concerning the person and work of Christ (*An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 6th ed. [reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1959] 245).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 245-46.

the body of Christ. Perhaps most interesting of all, however, is the inclusion of prophets with apostles in Eph 2:20-21 as having a significant role in laying the foundation of the spiritual "holy temple" of the church.¹¹ Contextually, the foundational role includes the reception and transmission of previously undisclosed "revelation" (Eph 3:3, 5) regarding the fellow heirship and joint membership of Gentiles and Jews in the body of Christ (Eph 3:6). Regarding that new revelation, Paul speaks of information "which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men as it has now been revealed to the saints through His apostles *and prophets* through the Spirit" (Eph 3:5, emphasis added). The prophets along with the apostles were recipients of special divine revelation, according to the apostle.

In the context of Eph 2:19–3:10, another characteristic emerges. That is the appearance of a certain technical vocabulary pertaining to divine revelatory activity. The terms include poklycin (*apokalupsin*, "revelation") in 3:3, mystrion (*mystrion*, "mystery") in 3:3 and *mystri* in 3:4, pekalfuh (*apekalyphth*, "has been revealed") in 3:5, *mystriou* in 3:9, and pokekrymmnoy (*apokekrymmenou*, "hidden") in 3:9. All are words that frequently assume a technical revelatory significance. When used together, they portray God's activity in making known to His special servants hitherto unrevealed information relating to the outworking of His program in the world. The clustering of such words in a given context is indicative of direct revelatory activity such as provides for divine inspiration through His spokespersons and, in the case of the NT, writers. In this type of setting gnvrzv (*gnriz*, "I make known,"), also used in that Ephesian context (3:3, 5, 10), takes on a special meaning of an immediate proclamation of the divine will.¹² Added to the technical terms is, of course, the noun p-stolow (*apostolos*, "apostle") in 2:20 and 3:5, a designation applied by almost everyone to special authoritative appointees of Christ who received direct revelation for the church.

The appearance of prophets alongside the apostles in such a strongly revelatory context, and their role in conveying previously unrevealed data (Eph 3:5), supplies a pointed indication that prophecy too was a revelatory gift. Nor should it escape notice that another gift-related term, sofa (*sophia*, "wisdom," 3:10), appears here with the rest of the revelatory terms. It

¹¹For evidence that apostles and prophets in Eph. 2:20 were two gifts rather than one, see Robert L. Thomas, "Prophecy Rediscovered? A Review of *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*," *BSac* 149 (January-March 1992):88-90; F. David Farnell, "Does the New Testament Teach Two Prophetic Gifts?" *BSac* 150 (January-March 1993):62-88.

¹²W. Mundle, "pokalptv," *NIDNTT* 3:314.

designates new information received through apostles and prophets. This appearance of "wisdom" directs attention to another passage where it is prominent.

(2) Paul wrote much about wisdom in his first epistle to Corinth, especially in 1 Corinthians 2. Another context where revelatory terms are frequent, that passage provides readers with what is probably the best NT picture of regular Christian revelatory activity.¹³ Technical words there include *mystrion* in vv. 1,¹⁴ 7, *apokrypt* in v. 7, *apokalypt* in v. 10, and *sophia* in vv. 1, 4, 5, 6 (twice), 7, 13. In addition, Paul graphically describes the hiddenness of what God has revealed in a conflation of quotations from Isa. 64:4 and 52:15 (v. 9) and uses a technical expression for secrets of God, *t buh* (*ta bath*, "the deep things,"¹⁵ v. 10), that the Spirit has revealed to Paul and other special divine messengers.

Amid this strongly revelatory context, the apostle emphatically designates the Holy Spirit as the immediate agent of revelation and climaxes his description of the process thus: "which things we also speak, not with words taught by human wisdom, but with [those] taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual [thoughts] with spiritual [words]" (1 Cor 2:13). Charles Hodge renders the last three Greek words of that verse, "clothing the truths of the Spirit in the words of the Spirit," and continues,

There is neither in the Bible nor in the writings of men, a simpler or clearer statement of the doctrines of revelation and inspiration. Revelation is the act of communicating divine knowledge by the Spirit to the mind. Inspiration is the act of the same Spirit, controlling those who make the truth known to others. The thoughts, the truths made known, and the words in which they are recorded, are declared to be equally from the Spirit.¹⁶

The way special agents of divine revelation operated was to receive input from the Spirit in their inner consciousness and through the Spirit to

¹³Of course, the Apocalypse is full of information about how God communicated revelation to John on the island of Patmos, but that apocalyptic revelatory activity was somewhat exceptional.

¹⁴Vaticanus and Beza are among an impressive list of sources that support *martrion* instead of *mystrion* in 1 Cor 2:1. The latter receives strong support from p⁴⁶, Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, and other witnesses.

¹⁵F. W. Grosheide says "the deep things of God" are God Himself in His infinitude, including particularly His plan of salvation in Christ as referred to in Rom 11:33 (*Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953] 68). C. Brown refers the term to God's "secret wisdom" ("*uew*," *NIDNTT* 2:75). J. Blunck says it is "the paradox of unveiling and veiling which is Christian," in other words, revelation ("*buow*," *NIDNTT* 2:198).

¹⁶*Systematic Theology* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1880) 1:162.

transform that input into inspired words that they communicated to others. They may have delivered those words orally as in a prophet's communication to a local congregation in Corinth, or they may have done so in writing as in the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. The purpose of the former type was to meet needs of that particular congregation for a time. The ultimate purpose of the latter, after meeting the doctrinal and practical needs of the Corinthian congregation, was to minister in the same way to the body of Christ throughout the present age. Divine revelation had divine inspiration as its necessary sequel.

Sophia is prominent throughout Paul's discussion of the process of revelation and inspiration, a factor that attaches to the term a technical revelatory significance. It may in some contexts refer in general to wisdom available to all believers, but in this kind of setting it has its more restricted sense of referring to "the deep things of God" communicated to agents of special revelation. The latter is its connotation when Paul speaks of "the word of wisdom" in 1 Cor 12:8. That was a gift to a limited number that enabled them as apostles and prophets to receive, assimilate, and communicate "mysteries" to others.

(3) The gift of "the word of knowledge" takes on a revelatory connotation because of its use alongside prophecy in 1 Cor 13:2: "And if I have [the gift of] prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." If knowledge results from prophetic revelations as do mysteries, it too must be revelatory in nature. As the word of wisdom pertained to newly revealed data, the word of knowledge apparently pertained to an inspired application of that data to new situations, as illustrated in 2 Pet 3:1-3 and Jude 17-18.¹⁷

If the NT names more than one revelatory gift—as it apparently does—that opens the possibility that writings by nonapostles could be inspired.

EVIDENCE OF REVELATORY GIFT ACTIVITY IN THE NT

The NT itself illustrates the use of revelatory gifts to produce inspired utterances and writings.

(1) The spoken ministry of Agabus is an example. As one of the prophets from Jerusalem who came to the church of Antioch, he predicted a widespread famine that would happen during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:27-28). The famine occurred as predicted and became the occasion

¹⁷Cf. Thomas, *Understanding Spiritual Gifts* 37.

of the "famine visit" by Barnabas and Saul of Tarsus to Jerusalem with an offering to relieve the church in Judea (Acts 11:29-30).

How was Agabus able to foretell the future? God revealed to him, as a possessor of the gift of prophecy, an event soon to occur, which revelation he transformed into spoken words so as to communicate it to fellow Christians. That inspired message provided the basis for the Antiochian church to act by way of providing for their fellow believers in Judea.

Scripture never calls Agabus an apostle, but it does call him a prophet. The gift of prophecy was a sufficient credential to receive special revelation to convert into an inspired message.

Acts records another prophecy and fulfillment of Agabus in Acts 21:10-11:

And while we remained many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea, and after he came to us and took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, he said, "The Holy Spirit says these things: `The man whose belt this is, the Jews will bind thus in Jerusalem and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

Acts later records the literal fulfillment of this prophecy too (21:33).¹⁸ Here is another instance of revelation to a nonapostle who possessed the gift of prophecy and of the inspired utterance resulting from that revelation.

(2) Acts records a prophetic message by Paul and its fulfillment just as it does for Agabus. Acts 27:22 gives Paul's prediction that no loss of life would come to those on the storm-tossed ship. This resulted from a message given him by an angel of God, one which he believed (27:23-25). The prediction even included the grounding of the ship on an island (27:26). Each detail of Paul's prophecy came to fulfillment (27:41-44).

Notable are the parallels of this prophecy and fulfillment with those of Agabus. Yes, Paul was an apostle who would be the expected recipient of revelation to transmit to others as an inspired message. But so was Agabus, a nonapostle.

Probably all the apostles received the gift of prophecy, but not all the prophets were apostles, of course.

(3) Harris has written, "No New Testament book claims authorship by a prophet,"¹⁹ but with his documentation offers a qualified correction to

¹⁸See Thomas, "Prophecy Rediscovered?" 90-91, for a defense of the inerrancy of this prophecy.

¹⁹Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity* 245.

that statement when he acknowledges Revelation to be such a book.²⁰ Bruce has more correctly noted a NT writer who bases his work solely on prophetic inspiration:

The Apocalypse is called 'the book of this prophecy' (e.g., Rev. 22:19); the author implies that his words are inspired by the same Spirit of prophecy as spoke through the prophets of earlier days: it is in their succession that he stands (Rev. 22:9). . . . Whether the seer of Patmos was the son of Zebedee or not, his appeal throughout the Apocalypse is not to apostolic authority but to prophetic inspiration.²¹

The last book of the Bible conspicuously demonstrates the revelatory nature of the NT gift of prophecy. The book's author bases the book's authority on his prophetic role, not on his apostolic gift. Harris is correct in observing the importance of apostolic authorship in the early church's recognition of the book's canonicity, but within the book itself, John sees the work's prophetic character as furnishing its determinative stature.

He uses *prophts* or its cognates eighteen times in the twenty-two chapters.²² In a number of ways, John puts himself into the category of the OT prophets.²³ He experienced an inaugural vision that gave him a divine endorsement (1:9-20). He used symbolic acts such as devouring the little scroll (10:10). He employed oracular formulas in the messages of chapters two and three (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). The primary if not exclusive focus in 10:7 is on OT prophets, but just a few verses later, he refers to his own NT prophetic gift (10:11). The first three references to prophecy in chapter 11 are probably to OT prophecy (11:3, 6, 10), if Moses and Elijah are those witnesses.

In 11:18, however, *tois profhtais* (*tois prophtais*, "the prophets") probably includes both OT and NT prophets. The linking of the prophets with the apostles in the similar passage of 18:20 and the angel's reference to the prophets as John's brothers in 22:9 require inclusion of a reference to NT prophets.²⁴ On the other hand the writer's reference to prophets in 10:7

²⁰Ibid., 324.

²¹F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988) 264-65.

²²*Profhtea* occurs seven times (1:3; 11:6; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), *proftiw* once (2:20), *profhtev* twice (10:11; 11:3), and *proftiw* eight times (10:7; 11:10, 18; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:6, 9).

²³Rolf Rendtorf, "proftiw k. t. l.," *TDNT* 6:812; G. Friedrich, "proftiw k. t. l.," *TDNT* 6:849; David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: Knox, 1979) 87-88.

²⁴D. E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 196.

quite definitely referred to OT prophets. So this must be a book where John regularly groups NT prophets with the prestigious company of OT prophets.²⁵ Several have suggested a reason for such an elevation of NT prophets: by the time John wrote Revelation, deaths of all the apostles but John had thrust prophecy into the limelight.²⁶ That such an authority shift occurred toward the close of the first century is quite conceivable in light of John's focus on prophecy in his epistles and in Revelation.²⁷ Jezebel's claim to the prophetic gift (2:20) is further recognition of the elevation of this gift.

The entity known as Babylon is apparently responsible for the deaths of "saints and prophets" in Rev 16:6, because 17:6 speaks of that harlot as being drunk "from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." From the link between the two passages, one would judge that the prophets of 16:6 are Christian prophets. Otherwise, they and their companion "saints" could hardly be martyrs of Jesus. The same observation applies to 18:20, 24. Use of *prophtai* alongside *apostoloi* in v. 20 necessitates a reference to Christian prophets, as does the fact that they suffered persecution for Jesus' sake.²⁸ In 19:10 once again, exclusively NT prophecy is in view. Though the preincarnate Christ was the channel of revelation to the highly regarded OT prophets (1 Pet 1:11), their testimony did not center on the testimony of Jesus. Only NT prophets by virtue of being vehicles of Jesus' words could qualify for the definition, "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (19:10). Of interest in 19:10 is the elevation of the NT prophet's revelation to the level of angelic revelation. In response to John's attempt to worship him, the angel identified himself as a fellow-slave of John and other Christian prophets, an indication of prophetic inspiration's authority. According to that statement, the prophets had the same part as angels in bearing the witness of Jesus.

The last six references to prophecy are in Revelation 22 (vv. 6, 7, 9, 10, 18, 19) and relate to John's prophetic ministry in writing the prophecy of Revelation. Of special relevance to the present survey is the inclusion of other Christian prophets as "fellow-slaves" with the revealing angel (22:9). The verse shows that the prestigious role of the prophet John in 19:10 was not limited to him. It belonged to his contemporaries who also possessed

²⁵Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22, An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) 112.

²⁶Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity* 197; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 232.

²⁷Cf. Robert L. Thomas, "The Spiritual Gift of Prophecy in Revelation 22:18," *JETS* 32/2 (June 1989):208-10.

²⁸G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 268.

the gift of prophecy.

Of course, as I have suggested elsewhere, 22:18-19 announces the termination of NT prophecy.²⁹ In practice, the church of the second century did not respond immediately to that warning. The decline of prophecy during the second century was gradual, but by their times, Hippolytus³⁰ and Chrysostom³¹ recognized the gift of prophecy in the church to be a thing of the past.

The discussion above shows the NT to speak of four revelatory gifts, apostleship, prophecy, the word of wisdom, and the word of knowledge. The last two overlap with the first two and are not as prominent. None disputes the revelatory character of apostleship, so this discussion's main attention has gone to developing the revelational nature of NT prophecy.

TESTS OF CANONICITY

If that is true of NT prophecy and if revelation resulted in inspired utterances and inspired writings, it is appropriate to investigate tests applied in the early church to ascertain which books belonged in the canon.

Test of Inspiration

In light of 2 Tim 3:16, the test to prove a book's canonicity would be its inspiration: "All Scripture is inspired by God." If inclusion in Scripture involves being "God-breathed" (*uepneystow*, *theopneustos*), canonization entailed that same qualification, because books of the NT canon constitute NT Scripture just as books of the OT canon constitute OT Scripture. Some recent scholars have suggested that canon does not equal Scripture, that human elements—the doubts, the debates, and the delays—of the canonical process are a part of the definition of canon.³² Canon, they say, is a theological construct that belongs to the postapostolic period, but

²⁹Thomas, "Spiritual Gift of Prophecy in Rev 22:18," 215-16; idem, *Revelation 8–22* 513-19.

³⁰Hippolytus, "Treatise on Christ and Antichrist," *ANF* 5:204-19, esp, 205, 211; cf. Stanley M. Burgess, *The Spirit and the Church: Antiquity* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984) 52; Ronald E. Heine, "The Role of the Gospel of John in the Montanist Controversy," *The Second Century* 6 (1987-88):12.

³¹Chrysostom, *Homilies in First Corinthians*, Homilies 29, 36; cf. F. David Farnell, "When Will the Gift of Prophecy Cease?" *BSac* 150 (April-June 1993):195-96 n. 79.

³²E.g., David G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 356; cf. Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, rev. and expanded ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995) 142-43.

Scripture speaks of the intrinsic quality of inspiration and is devoid of the ideas of delimitation and selection that canon entails.

That definition of canon falters, however, in not conceding that NT writers who were conscious they were penning Scripture³³ were also conscious of a closed OT canon which their works supplemented,³⁴ a new canon that would eventually close if Christ did not return before such a body of literature was complete. If the idea of canon existed this early, it is not legitimate to view canon as a "theological construct" arising in the post-apostolic period. It seems better to follow Harris and Warfield in concluding that the test of canonicity is inspiration.³⁵

The early church did not apply this test directly and exclusively, however. Gamble notes, ". . . In the deliberations of the ancient church about the authority of its writings, we nowhere find an instance of inspiration being used as a criterion of discrimination."³⁶ Early second-century Christians lived in an environment of many inspired utterances, some of them a spill-over from the apostolic period³⁷ and some of them allegedly originating in the second century and onward. They apparently applied 2 Tim 3:16 terminology freely, using words related to "inspiration" to refer postapostolic writings.³⁸ Use of "inspiration" to apply to writings from the second century and later is attributable to a lack of discernment among the early fathers.

But to view "spill-over" sayings from the apostolic period as inspired is most probably valid in many cases. It is likely that early Christians possessed sayings of Jesus not found in the canonical gospels. Such was the case of Paul's citation of Jesus' words in Acts 20:35. In addition, some whose lives spanned from the apostolic period into the postapostolic

³³Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity* 235-45.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 293-94.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 191; Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970) 163-65, 415-16.

³⁶Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon, Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 72.

³⁷Clement of Alexandria quotes from an epistle of Clement of Rome as though it were Scripture (Clement, *Stromata*, iv.17, in *ANF* 2:428-29).

³⁸Bruce M. Metzger calls attention to the use of *uepneyctow* by early Christians to refer to such writings as Basil's commentary on the first six days of creation, a synodical epistle from the Council of Ephesus, and an epitaph on the grave of Bishop Abercius (*The Canon of the New Testament, Its Origin, Development, and Significance* [New York: Oxford, Clarendon, 1988] 256). He also notes that Augustine said Jerome wrote under the dictation of the Holy Spirit (*ibid.*, 255) and that Clement of Alexandria quoted "inspired" passages from the epistles of Clement of Rome and of Barnabas, the *Shepherd* of Hermas, and the Apocalypse of Peter, as well as ascribing to Jesus sayings not found in the four canonical gospels (*ibid.*, 134).

period probably remembered prophecies of local and temporary application delivered to various congregations. Such were not necessary for the long-term health of the larger body of Christ, however, and were lost to later generations.

So the task of the second-century church was that of sifting through mounds of inspired sayings and writings—some legitimate and others counterfeit—to come up with those that would benefit the ongoing growth of the church until the Lord Jesus' return. The method they used was not to rule out as noninspired all noncanonical writings, but rather to decide on those whose inspiration was unique in that they exhibited special authority with long-lasting and universal value, value that matched the authority of the OT canon.³⁹ What were their criteria for doing so? It appears that they had a sort of "grid" that writings had to pass through in order to gain that recognition, a grid composed of the following tests.

³⁹See Edward J. Young, "The Authority of the Old Testament," in *The Infallible Word*, N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., 3rd rev. printing (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 55-91.

Test of Apostolicity

The first criterion was that of apostolicity or apostolic authorship. Since Jesus Christ left no writings of His own, the special representatives whom He appointed held the highest authority for His followers. Harris presents a thorough case to demonstrate the importance of apostolic authorship to second-century Christian writers.⁴⁰ Even in cases where an author was not an apostle, patristic tendencies were toward arguing for an apostolic influence. The fathers claimed Peter's apostolic authority for Mark and Paul's apostolic authority for Luke and Hebrews.⁴¹ It is indisputable that a book's relationship to an apostle was an important factor as early Christians sorted among many allegedly inspired writings.

But was apostolicity ultimately determinative? Bruce concluded, "The patristic idea that his [Luke's] Gospel owes something to the apostolic authority of Paul is quite unfounded."⁴² Did the early church make a mistake? Was, then, the church's selection based on erroneous criteria? Stonehouse says no, the church did not receive Mark and Luke because of their apostolicity, but because of their inspiration.⁴³

Harris attempts to defend apostolic authorship as the only criterion, claiming that Mark and Luke followed the teachings of their masters, Peter and Paul, and that Paul wrote Hebrews using a secondary author.⁴⁴ He is undecided on the authorship of James and Jude. He holds them to be apostolic either because they were written by the James and Jude, who were among the twelve; or because they were written by James and Jude, the half-brothers of the Lord, who as witnesses of His resurrection became apostles in a special sense.⁴⁵

In defending apostolicity as the sole test, Harris writes, "But rather remarkably, there is no hard evidence for lost writings of the apostles."⁴⁶ Later he adds, "Efforts to prove that there were some books that have been lost have not been successful."⁴⁷ Yet statements of Paul in his extant epistles provide substantial indication that he wrote letters that have not survived. The most conclusive evidence of a lost epistle lies in 1 Cor 5:9-11 where it is evident to most that Paul refers to a letter to the Corinthians earlier than 1 Corinthians. Philippians 3:1 also offers a strong implication

⁴⁰Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity* 248-59.

⁴¹Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 257-58.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 265-66.

⁴³Stonehouse, "Authority of the New Testament" 114, 119.

⁴⁴Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity* 255, 281-82.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 273-74.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 283.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 295.

to that effect. About the latter, Lightfoot wrote, ". . . In the epistles of our Canon we have only a part—perhaps not a very large part—of the whole correspondence of the Apostle [Paul], either with Churches or with individuals."⁴⁸ Perhaps 2 Cor 3:1 in referring to "epistles of recommendation" implies that much correspondence of the nature of 3 John circulated among early churches to provide personal letters of introduction. If apostles wrote some of those, they too are now lost.

The assumption that apostolicity was the sole criterion of canonicity falters also in its position that Christ's authoritative apostles were inerrant in all their utterances and writings. Peter's behavior at Antioch in refusing to have table fellowship with Gentiles should suppress any thought that they were (Gal 2:11-14). The confrontation between Paul and him over that issue proves that apostles made mistakes even after being commissioned by Christ to serve as His authoritative representatives. So apostolicity as the only test of canonicity is insufficient in another regard.

The NT books not written by one of the twelve or Paul are Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, James, and Jude.⁴⁹ If one grants that James and Jude became apostles by Christ's appointment—Gal 1:19 indicates James was such and 1 Cor 15:7 strongly implies it—that leaves four books without apostolic authorship. That the apostolic circle was wider than just the twelve and Paul seems likely in light of 2 Cor 11:13. Paul's opponents at Corinth could hardly have disguised themselves as apostles if that group consisted of only thirteen people who were well-known.

That leaves the apostolic authorship of four books unaccounted for. The defenders of a one-test criterion argue for the *apostolicity* of these four, if not the apostolic authorship. As noted above, Harris contends that an understudy or an amanuensis of an apostle wrote them, thereby giving the books apostolic authority.⁵⁰ That theory is insubstantial, however, because apostleship was a nontransferable spiritual gift. An apostle had no authority to bestow the gift or its revelational ability on another. For a book to possess apostolic authority, it must have an apostle as its author, not someone he designates. God alone could bestow apostolicity (1 Cor 12:11, 18)—or any other spiritual gift for that matter—and that only on those who had witnessed Christ's resurrection. Mark may have been a

⁴⁸J. B. Lightfoot, "Lost Epistles to the Philippians?" *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, 6th ed. (reprint of 1913 Macmillan ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953) 138; cf. Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament* 272 n. 12, 284 n. 34.

⁴⁹This essay assumes the traditional authorship of all the NT books. In the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews, along with many individuals in the early church, it assumes an unknown authorship.

⁵⁰Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity* 285.

witness of Christ's resurrection, but Luke and the writer to the Hebrews were not (Luke 1:1-4; Heb. 2:1-4).

So apostolicity cannot account for the inspiration of all the books that the church eventually recognized as part of the NT canon. Gamble agrees: "Widespread and important as this criterion [i.e., apostolicity] was, it must still be said that no NT writing secured canonical standing on the basis of apostolicity alone."⁵¹ Some books did not come from an apostle, so some other gift must explain the inspiration of the remaining four.

Test of Propheticity

The other speaking gift that provided a basis for inspired communication was the gift of prophecy. The discussion above has shown conclusively how John claimed nothing more than prophetic authorship for his Apocalypse. It has also disclosed that he freely intermingled NT prophets and their prophecies with OT prophets. With that setting of the stage for the second-century church, how did early Christians respond to the possibility of prophetic origin as a proof for inspiration?

The Muratorian Canon values prophetic origin quite highly in that regard.⁵² This list of canonical works approves the Apocalypse very strongly and even uses that book's authority to verify the catholicity of Paul's epistles:⁵³

. . . The blessed apostle Paul himself, following the example of his predecessor John, writes by name to only seven churches. . . . It is clearly recognizable that there is one Church spread throughout the whole extent of the earth. For John also in the Apocalypse, though he writes to seven churches, nevertheless speaks to all.

By making Paul dependent on John in this way, the list's compiler shows his preference for prophetic inspiration even over apostolic authorship. Bruce has written,

This making Paul follow the precedent of John is chronologically preposterous; it probably indicates, however, that for the compiler the primary criterion

⁵¹Gamble, *New Testament Canon* 68; cf. Steven Voorwinde, "The Formation of the New Testament Canon," *Vox Reformata* 60 (1995):25.

⁵²In dealing with the Muratorian Canon, this discussion accepts the late second-century date of composition (cf. C. E. Hill, "The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," *WTJ* 57/2 [Fall 1995]:437-52; William Horbury, "The Wisdom of Solomon in the Muratorian Fragment," *JTS* NS 45 [1994]:158-59).

⁵³Gamble, *New Testament Canon* 46.

of inclusion in the list was prophetic inspiration. In the early church as a whole the predominant criterion appears to have been apostolic authority, if not apostolic authorship; for this writer, however, even apostolic authorship evidently takes second place to prophetic inspiration.⁵⁴

Paul's patterning of his seven epistles after John's seven messages in Revelation 2–3 demonstrates the intention that those epistles reach the church in every place. The precedence granted the Apocalypse in that statement reflects the compiler's high ranking of the book among the rest of the books he lists. Bruce is correct in recognizing the Muratorian author's high esteem for prophetic inspiration, which is also the basis of the Apocalypse's self-claim of authority.

The author's view of prophecy's importance should affect the interpretation of a later statement in his Canon:

But the *Shepherd* was written by Hermas in the city of Rome quite recently, in our own times, when his brother Pius occupied the bishop's chair in the church of the city of Rome; and therefore it may be read indeed, but cannot be given out to the people in church either among the prophets, since their number is complete, or among the apostles for it is after (their) time.

Both Bruce and Metzger refer this statement to the OT prophets,⁵⁵ but plenty of contextual merit favors the interpretation that the number of *NT* prophets is complete.⁵⁶

First, the compiler's preferential ranking of John's Apocalypse among the recognized books makes at least a partial reference to *NT* prophets probable. Second, he makes no mention of the OT elsewhere in the extant portion of the list.⁵⁷ It devotes exclusive attention to books

⁵⁴Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 164.

⁵⁵Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 166; Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament* 307 n. 8.

⁵⁶See Heine, "Gospel of John in the Montanist Controversy" 13; contra Gary Steven Shogren, "Christian Prophecy and Canon in the Second Century: A Response to B. B. Warfield" (paper read at the 47th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Philadelphia, November 18, 1995) 19.

⁵⁷The only possible allusion to the OT is indirect, when the compiler refers to "Wisdom also, written by Solomon's friends in his honour." The Wisdom of Solomon is a book of the OT Apocrypha, making its mention in this list surprising. Metzger calls this "a puzzle that has never been satisfactorily solved" (Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament* 198). As a reason for its inclusion here, Bruce suggests its writing came closer to *NT* times than to the period of the OT (Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 165). William Horbury has suggested the compiler did not intend to include Wisdom among the canonical books, but his discussion of it toward the close of his list indicates it was among disputed books from *both* testaments ("The Wisdom of Solomon in the Muratorian

eventually recognized as the NT canon, so why at this point should the list abruptly inject a reference to OT prophets? Third, the compiler could hardly suggest that the *Shepherd* might have been read among the OT prophets, because that work is a distinctly *Christian* writing. In his discussion of the NT-related writings, he would hardly have negated the possibility of reading a Christian work among writings of OT prophets. Fourth, the relatively recent date of the *Shepherd's* composition furnishes the compiler of the list a reason for excluding it from books to be read in church. This factor may well imply that the period of normative NT revelation had passed not too long before its writing.⁵⁸ It would hardly be suitable if the relatively recent date was a ground for exclusion from the OT prophets who had completed their work over four centuries earlier.

If the writer does in fact state that the number of NT prophets is complete and that is his reason for not recommending the reading of the *Shepherd* in church, it furnishes another strong indication of his recognition of prophetic inspiration as a foundation for inclusion in the NT canon.

A number of other early fathers and writings manifest a high respect for prophetic inspiration in relation to canonical recognition. The *Didache* blends together NT prophets with apostles and OT prophets and emphasizes the need to distinguish between true and false prophets or apostles:⁵⁹

Let every apostle that cometh to you be received as the Lord. But he shall not remain *except* one day; but if there be need also the next; but if he remain three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle goeth away, let him take nothing but bread until he lodgeth; but if he ask money, he is a false prophet. And every prophet that speaketh in the Spirit ye shall neither try nor judge; for every sin shall be forgiven, but this sin shall not be forgiven. But not every one that speaketh in the Spirit is a prophet; but only if he hold the ways of the Lord. Therefore from their ways shall the false prophet and the prophet be known. . . . And every prophet, proved true, working unto the mystery of the Church in the world, yet not teaching *others* to do what he himself doeth, shall not be judged among you, for with God he hath his judgment; for so did also the ancient prophets (*Did.* 11. 4-8, 11).

Note the free interchange of apostles with prophets as spokespersons of inspired utterances.

Ignatius also lifts up the gift of prophecy when he instructs his

Fragment" 152-56).

⁵⁸L. W. Hurtado, "Muratorian Fragment," *ISBE*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed., 3:433.

⁵⁹Cf. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon" 327.

readers to hear Christian prophets because the prophets had "lived according to Jesus Christ" and were "inspired by His grace" (*Magn.* 8.2; cf. 9.2). He adds that Christians should love not only the gospel and the apostles but also the prophets because they had announced the advent of Christ and had become his disciples (*Phld.* 5.2).⁶⁰ Clement of Alexandria cites "the prophetic spirit" as the source of a number of NT as well as OT portions of Scripture (*The Instructor* 1:5). Since he included nonpredictive parts of the NT in this designation, he most probably had in mind the prophetic inspiration that lay behind all books of the Bible. Justin Martyr wrote about Abraham: "For as he believed the voice of God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness, in like manner we, having believed God's voice spoken by the apostles of Christ, and promulgated to us by the prophets, have renounced even to death all the things of the world."⁶¹ He defended the existence of prophetic power in the Christian church.⁶²

In the third century Dionysius of Alexandria, a pupil of Origen, wrongly thought that John the Apostle did not write Revelation, but nevertheless accepted the book's inspiration.⁶³ Though arguing vigorously against apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse, he said, "But for my part I should not dare to reject the book" (Eusebius *The Ecclesiastical History* 7.25). Dionysius' willingness to embrace the authority of the Apocalypse without apostolic authorship indicates his recognition of a nonapostolic source of inspiration which was most probably the gift of prophecy.

At least three other early fathers echo from the Muratorian Canon a relationship between Paul's epistles to seven churches and John's seven messages in Revelation 2–3. They are Cyprian, Victorinus of Pettau, and Jerome.⁶⁴ The two former leaders point out the relationship between Paul's churches and those of John, indicating an ongoing tradition of Paul's dependence on John's prophecy as a pattern.

Granted, these early voices do not speak as loudly or as frequently about prophetic inspiration as they and others do about apostolic

⁶⁰Cf. *ibid.*, 325.

⁶¹*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 119, in ANF 1:259; cf. Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 6th ed. (Cambridge and London: Macmillan, 1889) 173. That Tertullian included the author of the Apocalypse among the prophets is evident from his words in *Dial.* chap. 100.81: "Moreover also among us a man named John one of the Apostles of Christ, prophesied in a revelation made to him that those who have believed on our Christ shall spend a thousand years in Jerusalem" (Westcott, *General Survey* 121).

⁶²Westcott, *General Survey* 168.

⁶³Harris, *Inspiration and Canon* 268.

⁶⁴Cyprian *Exhortation for Martyrdom* 11; Victorinus *On the Apocalypse* 1.7, on Rev. 1:20; Jerome *Epistle* 53:9.

authority, but they do speak. In light of such early words, Gausсен's reasoning based on NT revelation has merit:

And since St Luke and St Mark were, amid so many other prophets, the fellow-workers chosen by St Paul and St Peter, is it not clear enough that these two apostolic men must have bestowed upon such associates the gifts which they dispensed to so many besides who had believed? Do we not see Peter and John first go down to Samaria to confer these gifts on the believers of that city; this followed by Peter coming to Cesarea, there to shed them on all the Gentiles who had heard the word in the house of the centurion Cornelius (Acts viii. 14, 17)? Do we not see St Paul bestow them abundantly on the believers of Corinth, on those of Ephesus, on those of Rome (Acts xix. 6, 7; 1 Cor xii. 28, xiv; Rom i. 11, xv. 19, 29)? Do we not see him, before employing his dear son Timothy as his fellow-labourer, causing spiritual powers to descend on him (1 Tim iv. 14; 2 Tim i. 6)? And is it not evident that St Peter must have done as much for his dear son Mark (1 Pet. v. 13), as St Paul did for his companion Luke (Acts xiii. 1, xvi. 10, xxvii. 1; Rom xvi. 21; Col iv. 14; 2 Tim iv. 11; Philem 24; 2 Cor viii. 18)? Silas, whom St Paul had taken to accompany him (as he took Luke and John, whose surname was Mark), Silas was a prophet at Jerusalem (Acts xv. 32). Prophets abounded in all the primitive churches. Many were seen to come down from Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts xi. 27); a great many were to be found in Corinth (1 Cor xii. 19, 20, xiv. 31, 39); Judas and Silas were prophets in Jerusalem. Agabus was such in Judea; farther, four daughters, still in their youth, of Philip the evangelist, were prophetesses in Cesarea (Acts xi. 28, xxi. 9, 10); and in the Church of Antioch, there were to be seen many believers who were prophets and doctors (Acts xiii. 1, 2); among others Barnabas (St Paul's first companion), Simeon, Manaen, Saul of Tarsus himself; and, finally, that Lucius of Cyrene, who is thought to be the Lucius whom Paul (in his Epistle to the Romans) calls his kinsman (Rom xvi. 21), and whom (in his Epistle to the Colossians) he calls *Luke the physician* (Col iv. 14); in a word, the St Luke whom the ancient fathers call indifferently Lucas, Lucius, and Lucanus.

From these facts, then it becomes sufficiently evident that St Luke and St Mark ranked at least among the prophets whom the Lord had raised up in such numbers in all the Churches of the Jews and the Gentiles, and that from among all the rest they were chosen by the Holy Ghost to be conjoined with the apostles in writing the sacred books of the New Testament.⁶⁵

Gausсен erred in believing that apostles had the authority to bestow gifts on men, but was correct in the sense that apostles did have the discernment

⁶⁵L. Gausсен, *Theopneustia, The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*, rev. ed., trans David Scott (reprint; Chicago: Moody, 1949) 83-85.

to recognize what gifts others had received from God. He correctly reads the NT in allowing for an abundance of people with the prophetic gift in the first-century church and in acknowledging that Mark and Luke composed their gospels by virtue of revelation received through their gifts of prophecy. In essence, Paul verified Luke's prophetic gift in 1 Tim 5:18 when he calls Luke 10:7 "Scripture." Though the NT never applies the term "prophet" to either Luke or Mark, no other satisfactory explanation of canonical recognition for their works has been forthcoming. The same is true of the Epistle to the Hebrews. By his own confession, the writer was neither a personal witness of Christ's life and resurrection nor an apostle (Heb 2:1-4), so he must have possessed the gift of prophecy in order to receive special revelation and produce an inspired product.

The test of propheticity was subject to one further qualification. Application of the test must keep in mind the authority of apostles over prophets as illustrated in Paul's regulation of the Corinthian prophets (cf. 1 Cor 14:29-32). That explains the pronounced inclination of the early Christian fathers to connect books written by prophets with apostles. They related Luke, Acts, and Hebrews with Paul in one way or another, and Mark with Peter. New Testament prophets did not work independently of apostolic oversight.

The first test a work had to pass to gain recognition as inspired, then, was either apostolicity or propheticity. Conceivably, however, early Christians had in their possession numerous inspired messages that met one of these two criteria. How did they proceed beyond this point? Bruce suggests the additional tests of antiquity, orthodoxy, catholicity, and traditional use.⁶⁶

Test of Antiquity

A work that originated after the period of the apostles and prophets, though possibly considered inspired by some, could not be canonical. The Muratorian Canon compiler had a high regard for the *Shepherd* of Hermas, but it came too late to merit being read in church. The Apocalypse of Peter had merit in some circles, but being written by someone other than Peter at a later time, neither did it possess the authority to gain universal acceptance, according to the compiler of the Muratorian list. The test of antiquity, then, was nothing more than a verification of the tests of apostolicity and propheticity.

Test of Orthodoxy

⁶⁶Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 259-63.

Second-century churchmen applied the criterion of orthodoxy to writings that were inspired or claimed inspiration to determine their worthiness for inclusion among the canonical Scriptures. This test appealed to the doctrines set forth in the undisputed apostolic writings and maintained by churches founded by apostles.⁶⁷ These churchmen lived in a climate of developing heresies such as Docetism and Gnosticism, so when imitation gospels and Acts began to appear in the name of apostles, they had to apply criteria that would distinguish their teachings from what the apostles had taught. That teaching had remained consistent through a regular succession of elders in those original churches and was summed up in the churches' rule of faith or baptismal creed.⁶⁸

That rule of faith answered Marcion in declaring that the Bible included more than one gospel and ten epistles of one apostle. It included four gospels and thirteen epistles of Paul as well as Acts, which gave a background for those epistles.⁶⁹ That was the beginning of the definition of the apostolic tradition, so any other books that belonged alongside those writings had to coincide with their teachings. In a sense, apostolic tradition helped to determine what was Scripture, and in turn, the earliest recognized books helped to determine the extent of the NT canon.⁷⁰

Central among those teachings was what a book said about the person and work of Christ. Does it identify Him as the historical Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead, and ascended to the Father's right hand?⁷¹ Any writing that did not maintain a true picture of Him as its central figure was unacceptable (cf. 1 Cor 12:3). If it questioned His full humanity throughout His life, as did Gnostic writings, it could not be canonical (1 John 4:2-3). The same was true of any that questioned His deity and physical, bodily resurrection.

Yet some works that were quite orthodox in their teaching had to be ruled out because of pseudonymity. These included ones such as the *Acts of Peter*, the *Acts of Paul*, and the *Apocalypse of Peter*,⁷² writings that also failed the "Test of Antiquity."

Some early works remain which could pass the tests of inspiration, apostolicity or propheticity, antiquity, and orthodoxy, works that were "impeccably `orthodox,'" but which did not gain final canonical

⁶⁷Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 260.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 171-72.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 151-52.

⁷⁰Gamble, *New Testament Canon* 69-70.

⁷¹Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 260.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 261.

recognition.⁷³ Two further considerations remained, the tests of catholicity and traditional usage.

Test of Catholicity

To become a part of the NT canon, a work had to be beneficial on more than a local scale. The church as a whole had to endorse it. The Western church was slow to accept the Epistle to the Hebrews, but eventually did accept it so as not to be out of step with the rest of the churches.⁷⁴

Though from a modern perspective, some might rule out some of Paul's canonical epistles such as Galatians and the two Corinthian epistles because of their localized emphases, early leaders deemed them useful to all churches because Paul wrote epistles to seven churches just as John sent messages to seven churches in Revelation.⁷⁵ Every document started with local recognition, but the acceptance of only the canonical ones spread throughout the early church.

Test of Traditional Usage

The criterion of traditional use did not come into play until the third and fourth centuries. Origen and Eusebius in particular tried to discern whether a writing had been in public use from early times in the churches,⁷⁶ as did Jerome and Augustine a little later.⁷⁷ Unlike the other tests of apostolicity or propheticity, antiquity, orthodoxy, and catholicity which related more to internal characteristics of a writing, traditional usage took particular note of a book's place in the practice of churches.⁷⁸

Traditional use was in no way a major criterion, however. Some documents that occasionally found places in public reading did not eventually find their places in the NT canon, works such as *Shepherd of Hermas*, *1 Clement*, and the *Didache*. Conversely, other works that lacked longstanding and broad usage—works such as James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John—did gain canonical status, even though it was late in coming.⁷⁹ The test simply corroborated conclusions reached on the grounds of other tests.

These tests, then, were the means earliest Christians used to decide

⁷³Gamble, *New Testament Canon* 70.

⁷⁴Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 261.

⁷⁵See discussion above under "Test of Propheticity"; cf. Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 262.

⁷⁶Gamble, *New Testament Canon* 70-71.

⁷⁷Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament* 237, 253.

⁷⁸See Gamble, *New Testament Canon* 70.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 71; Bruce, *Canon of Scripture* 263.

which books were inspired and therefore deserved places of authority alongside the OT canon: Did the writing come from an apostolic or prophetic source? If so, it was inspired and remained in the running. If not, it could not be inspired. Did the inspired writing come from antiquity, i.e., from the apostolic era? If so, it was still a candidate. Was it orthodox or, in other words, in accord with the doctrines of the apostles? If so, it remained a possibility. Was it catholic in its message so that all the churches would benefit from it? If so, it still could become canonical. Did it have a history of traditional usage in the churches? If so, that sealed the work's place among the books of the NT canon.

This is not to say that every test applied to every writing, nor is it to say early Christians applied the tests in the suggested sequence. Gamble observes, "It should be clear that the principles of canonicity adduced in the ancient church were numerous, diverse, and broadly defined, that their application was not systematic or thoroughly consistent, and that they were used in a variety of combinations."⁸⁰ Testing for apostolicity or propheticity was indispensable, but ultimately, the providence of God determined how and when the early church applied the rest of the tests.

But it should also be clear that without the avenue of special revelation resulting in direct inspiration, no writing could have attained such an exalted status. That is why the gifts of apostleship and prophecy—along with their attendant gifts of the words of wisdom and knowledge—are indispensable considerations in discussions of NT canonicity. Without inspired utterances and writings originating during the first century, no NT canon could have come into being. Those gifts were the vehicle—apart from the oral teachings of Jesus Christ—that God chose to communicate His new covenant message to the church and future generations. No writing was canonical apart from their use.

SUMMARY OF THE CASE

The four revelatory gifts of the Spirit to the body of Christ were apostleship, prophecy, the word of wisdom, and the word of knowledge. The last two are varying perspectives on the first two, which have far more prominence in the NT. Nonapostles as well as apostles received the gift of prophecy (as illustrated in the ministry of Agabus) allowing them to receive special revelation and transmit inspired communications.

The early church valued products of apostles most highly in their recognition of authoritative writings to take their places alongside the OT

⁸⁰Gamble, *New Testament Canon* 71.

canon, because they had direct appointments from Christ as His authoritative representatives. But apostolic authorship alone could not settle the issue of canonicity, so the early church also had a high regard for NT prophets as producers of inspired writings to be recognized as canonical. In the last decade of the first century, John emphasized a high view of prophecy by claiming prophetic inspiration as the basis of authority for the Apocalypse and by placing the NT prophet on a plane with OT prophets and angels as channels of divine revelation. The Muratorian Canon took its cue from that in its special focus on prophetic revelation. Then followed the *Didache*, Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Justyn Martyr, and others.

From among the inspired writings of apostles and prophets, the consensus of early Christians selected twenty-seven writings worthy of canonical recognition to compose NT Scripture. They did so with divine guidance, selecting from among many inspired writings that survived the first century A.D. by applying tests of antiquity, orthodoxy, catholicity, and traditional usage.