

A PRESUPPOSITIONAL APPROACH TO CANONICITY

by Rev. (Dr.) Paul Ferguson

The anti-preservationist approach of the *Critical Textualism* (CT) advocates is predicated on naturalistic foundational principles which would not be accepted in discussing canonicity. That is why leading textual critic, Bruce Metzger at least is consistent in arguing that the canon is not closed, “*It may be concluded, therefore, that, while the New Testament canon should, from a theoretical point of view, be regarded as open in principle for either the addition or the deletion of one or more books*¹.” Daniel Wallace also argues that the best we can say we have is, “*a fallible collection of infallible books*².” E. Jay Epp also argues that, “*Recent and current views are making it clear, however, that no easy equivalence exists between ‘original’ texts and ‘canonical’ texts, because each term is multivalent. Thus, there is no more a single ‘canonical’ text than there is a single ‘original’; our multiplicities of texts may all have been canonical (that is, authoritative) at some time and place. The same vitality, the same fluidity that can be observed in textual variation carries over to canonicity*³.” He went on to conclude...

“As New Testament textual criticism moves into the twenty-first century, it must shed whatever remains of its innocence, for nothing is simple anymore. Modernity may have led many to assume that a straightforward goal of reaching a single original text of the New Testament - or even a text as close as possible to that original - was achievable. Now, however, reality and maturity require that textual criticism face unsettling facts, chief among them that the term ‘*original*’ has exploded into a complex and highly unmanageable multivalent entity. Whatever tidy boundaries textual criticism may have presumed in the past have now been shattered, and its parameters have moved markedly not only to the rear and toward the front, but also sideways, as fresh dimensions of originality emerge from behind the variant readings and from other manuscript phenomena.”⁴

However, the Reformed theologian, Louis Gaussen, in the nineteenth century stated the orthodox view of canonicity, “*that a concealed but almighty hand has been here*

¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*, third, enlarged ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 286.

² Daniel Wallace, “Is Our Canon of Scripture a Fallible Collection of Infallible Books?” online at <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2007/08/is-our-canon-of-scripture-a-fallible-collection-of-infallible-books/> accessed 4 February 2009.

³ E. Jay Epp, “The Multivalence Of The Term “Original Text” In New Testament Textual Criticism” *Harvard Theological Review*, (1999), Volume 92, No. 3: 245-281.

⁴ *Ibid.*

*interposed, and that the Head of the Church watches in silence over the new Oracles as he has watched over the old, preserving them from age to age against the folly of men*⁵.” When we approach this question we see CT advocates cherry-picking the presuppositions and exegetical passages they want to pay attention to. James White in his book *The King James Only Controversy* manages to devote a single page out of 286 to the doctrine of preservation. No Scripture is cited just some rationalism about the fact that we do not know how God would preserve His Word. He does inconsistently state the pre-suppositional approach for canonicity, “*God worked with his people over time, leading them to recognize what he had already done through the act of inspiration.*”⁶ White needs to explain why the *Epistle of Barnabas*, a treatise against a Jewish interpretation of the Law, which dates from the late first or early second century is included in the New Testament canon of the fourth century manuscript *Codex Sinaiticus*. Did God lead His people to recognize the Words here but not the Canon? We could never have even begun to argue from Scripture had not the Church given it to us. If we had been given a different canon or a tampered translation we would not know the difference. We would argue from that which we were given. Douglas Wilson illustrates the inconsistency...

“Unbelieving criticism says that words, verses, pericopes, and books are all up for grabs. To grant this legitimacy with the first three, while drawing the line to keep 66 inspired books, is like being a little bit pregnant. *2 John* has 301 words while the last twelve verses of *Mark* have 260. At what word count does the authority of scripture become illegitimate?”⁷

The glaring inconsistency of James White’s blended-worldviews is seen in another of his books *Scripture Alone* published in 2004 by the same publishers. He begins his section on canonicity by asking rhetorically...

“Is a clear knowledge of the canon’s extent important to the function of scripture in the Church? Yes. So does it not follow that God will both providentially preserve the Scriptures and lead His people to a functional, sufficient knowledge of the canon so as to fulfill His purpose in inspiring them? Indeed, will He not exercise just as much divine power in establishing and fulfilling His purpose for the Scriptures (their functioning as a guide to the Church) as He as in inspiring them?”⁸

White then goes on to tell us, “*the true foundation for confidence in the Canon of Scripture is found in God’s Sovereign power to fulfill His own purposes (Psalm*

⁵ Quoted by D.G. Dunbar, “The Biblical Canon,” *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, edited by D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1986), 344.

⁶ James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), 47.

⁷ Douglas Wilson, “Discerning the Manuscript Traditions,” *Credenda*, Vol 10, Issue 1 online at <http://www.credenda.org/issues/10-1disputatio.php> accessed 20 April 2009.

⁸ James R. White, *Scripture Alone*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2004), 103.

135:6), and it is His purpose for Scripture to function in the church as a means of instruction, admonishment, and encouragement.”⁹ Speaking of II Tim 3:16-17, White explains that the apographs referred to by Paul, “in God’s providence, the very form of the church, having elders in the position of teaching and admonishing and leading, requires it to have access to this God-breathed source of authority, the Scriptures.”¹⁰

White is very clear in another section that the idea of any lost Scripture is a slight on God...

“The entire idea of ‘lost Scripture’ requires us to believe that God would go through the work of inspiring His word so as to provide for His church guidance and instruction and encouragement; but then, having inspired His Word, be shown incapable of protecting and preserving it and leading His church to recognize it for what it is. Arguing that God might wish to give more Scripture at a later point is one thing: charging God with delinquency of duty in light of His own stated purposes for the giving of Scripture is simply without any foundation in His truth as taught in the Bible. From a Biblical perspective of God’s sovereignty, the idea of ‘lost scripture’ is an unambiguously self-refuting concept.”

White goes on to say, “God is eternal and has infallible knowledge of the future; He surely knew every situation the church would face when He inspired the Scriptures long ago. Are we to believe that He is incapable of giving a revelation that would be sufficient throughout the church age?”

A leading Neo-Evangelical theologian, Wayne Grudem correctly adopts a fideistic pre-supposition to canonicity, “The severity of the punishments in Revelation 22:18-19 that come to those who add or take from God’s words also confirms the importance of God’s people having a correct canon¹¹.” Grudem does not explain how he knows anyone is adding or taking away to something that is nebulous and mutating. This position doesn’t allow for obedience or disobedience to Revelation 22:18-19. He also, paradoxically, sees the pressing need for preservation yet ultimately rejects it when he argued, “We know that God loves his people, and it is supremely important that God’s people have his words, for they are our life (Deut. 32:47; Matt. 4:4).” Grudem would be advised to follow the advice of Cornelius Van Til, who rejects casuistry by putting it, “We cannot choose epistemologies [theories

⁹ Ibid, 109.

¹⁰ Ibid, 104.

¹¹ Rolland McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism*, (Greenville: Ambassador Emerald International, 2004), 173, 185.

of knowledge] as we choose hats... [as if] a matter of taste¹².” David Norris also observes, “To profess verbal inspiration and at the same time to subject the Scripture texts to rationalistic critical methodology is to live in a crazed schizoid world, denying on the one hand what is confessed on the other¹³.” Reformed author, Keith A. Mathison adopts an even stronger position and argues...

“The fallible ‘*Jewish Church*’ was entrusted with the Old Testament Books for around fifteen hundred years and through His providential guidance managed to preserve an inerrant canon, so there is no *prima facie* reason why we cannot believe that God could entrust the New Testament books to a fallible New Testament Church and that they would also be able, under His providential guidance, to preserve an inerrant and authoritative canon. How does this happen apart from an infallible decree from an infallible Church telling the people of God which books are truly the Word of God? Jesus said His sheep hear His voice and do not hear the voice of strangers (*John 10:4-5*). God’s people in the Old Testament era hear His voice and God’s people in the present era hear His voice. Apart from such supernatural providential preservation, there is no way to explain the extent of unanimity that gradually arose concerning the twenty seven books of the New Testament.”

Professor of New Testament at the Reformed Theological College, Stephen Voorwinde also accepts the presuppositional faith approach to canonicity...

“Yet it remains a confession of faith that the canon of the New Testament corresponds exactly to Christ’s canon. Their identity cannot be absolutely established by historical study. Historical evidence and “proofs” take us only so far. As in so many other areas there comes a point where it becomes a matter of faith. Our theological presuppositions and the historical evidence dovetail, but not perfectly. While our view of the canon does greater justice to the historical process than do, for example, the views of Harnack and the Roman Catholic theologians, we do not claim any infallible criteria of canonicity. We can be absolutely certain and not just “practically” certain about the status of the canon, but our certainty does not depend upon our study of historical data, but it comes from our faith in the sovereignty and providence of God.”¹⁴

Kevin T. Bauder, president of *Central Baptist Theological Seminary* concurs...

“In fact, the mere recognition of the Bible as the Bible was the first step in accepting a tradition. Why did we acknowledge these sixty-six books and no others? It was not because we conducted a first-hand exploration of the evidence for canonicity. Few of us have ever really opened the canon for reexamination. On the contrary, we accepted it as

¹² Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1932), Vol II, Introduction.

¹³ David W. Norris, *The Big Picture: The Authority and Integrity of the Authentic Word of God*, (Cannock: Authentic Word, 2004), 294.

¹⁴ Stephen Voorwinde, “The Formation of the New Testament Canon,” *Vox Reformata* 60, 1995.

it was handed to us. Sooner or later we were given reasons for accepting the canon, but most of them were not the sort of reasons that we were in a position to verify or falsify. True, the Spirit did bear internal witness to the power of these writings, but we may not have felt that witness the very first time that we encountered a genealogy or a list of purification laws. Our acceptance of the Bible—these books and no others—was very largely a matter of tradition.”¹⁵

Another CT advocate, Robert Reymond also inconsistently applies providential preservation to the Canon but rejects it for the canonized words. He argues...

“For regardless of whether or not the Christian scholar thinks he possesses the one right criterion or the one right list of criteria for a given book’s canonicity, at some point...*the Christian must accept by faith* that the church, under the providential guidance of God's Spirit, got the number and the ‘*list*’ right since God did not provide the church with a specific list of New Testament books. All that we know for certain about the history of the first four centuries of the church would suggest that God’s Spirit providentially led his church—imperceptively yet inexorably—when it asked its questions, whatever they were, to adopt the twenty- seven documents that the Godhead had determined would serve as the foundation of the church’s doctrinal teaching and thus bear infallible witness throughout the Christian era to the great objective central events of redemptive history, and that *this* “apostolic tradition” *authenticated and established itself* over time in the mind of the church as just this infallible foundation and witness.”¹⁶

Richard Gaffin concurs...

“Just these twenty-seven books are what God has chosen to preserve, and he has not told us why.... In the matter of the New Testament as canon, too, until Jesus comes “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7 RSV). But that faith, grounded in the apostolic tradition of the New Testament, is neither arbitrary nor blind. It has its reasons, its good reasons; it is in conflict only with the autonomy of reason.”¹⁷

Although rejecting the TR, Greg Bahnsen also correctly summarizes the essential need for the preservation of the canon, albeit inconsistently...

“To think otherwise would be, in actual effect, to deprive the Christian church of the sure word of God. And that would in turn (a) undermine confidence in the gospel, contrary to God’s promise and our spiritual necessity, as well as (b) deprive us of the philosophical

¹⁵ Kevin T. Bauder, “The Formation of the New Testament Canon,” *In the Nick of Time* April 3, 2009 online at <http://www.centalseminary.edu/publications/Nick/Nick211.html> accessed April 3, 2009.

¹⁶ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 67.

¹⁷ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “The New Testament as Canon,” *Inerrancy and Hermeneutics*, ed. Harvey M. Conn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1988), 181. http://www.biblecentre.net/members/theo/tr/1_3.htm - _ftn24

precondition of any knowledge whatsoever, thus consigning us (in principle) to utter skepticism.”¹⁸

Evangelicals who believe in providential preservation of the canon but not canonized words because of their Enlightenment foundationalism need to explain why if God can protect His Word on that scale, why do we have so much trouble believing He could protect individual Words. Certainly, the true Church has settled providentially on the fact that the Bible contains 66 books and that *Mark 16:9-20* is in one of them. If we believe that God could use imperfect men such as the murderers: David, Moses and Paul to write the Bible and other imperfect men to recognize the true canon, then why would He withhold His guidance to imperfect men to receive His Words? Even Christ, the living Word, was conceived and born from the womb of an imperfect person. If the living Word can flow through imperfection, why do we doubt that the written Word can? If God used man to write the original autographs, then why is He prevented from using man to preserve them? Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit is still working behind natural processes (*Matt 5:45; 10:29*). Logically, if the Hortian Text theory were true, then it is only reasonable to declare that the New Testament canon is still open. To cite E. F. Hills, “*If God has preserved the New Testament in such a way that it is impossible to obtain assurance concerning the purity of the text, then there is no infallible New Testament today, and if there is no infallible New Testament today, it may very well be that there never was an infallible New Testament.*”¹⁹ The doctrine of divine inspiration of the original writings, clearly implies the doctrine of the divine preservation of Scripture.

Another inconsistent approach by CT advocates is found in respect of inerrancy. Charles Ryrie observes, “*To speak of limited inerrancy seems much more respectable, but it is also more deceitful. Intentional or not, it is a semantic game played to help cover up a dangerously deceptive view. We need to expose limited inerrancy for what it is. If parts of the Bible are not inerrant, then those parts are errant. That is an inescapable conclusion.*”²⁰ Paul Feinberg also writes...

“I have never been able to understand how one can be justified in claiming absolute authority for the Scriptures and at the same time deny their inerrancy. This seems to be the height of epistemological nonsense and confusion. Let me try to illustrate the point. Suppose that I have an Amtrak railroad schedule. In describing its use to you, I tell you that it is filled with numerous errors but that it is absolutely authoritative and trustworthy.

¹⁸ Greg Bahnsen, “The Inerrancy of the Autographa,” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 155.

¹⁹ E. F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended* (The Christian Research Press, 1956), 141.

²⁰ Charles Ryrie, *What You Should Know About Inerrancy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 17.

I think you would be extremely dubious. At least the schedule would have one thing going for it; it declares itself to be subject to change without notice.”²¹

What settles inspiration and inerrancy for us is the explanation we get in Scripture. We were not there when it happened. The same should be true concerning perfect preservation.

Another problem with the rationalistic Hortian approach is that if we are going to accept an old minority manuscript that is missing the first verses of John 8, but has the Epistle of Barnabas, then why not accept the Nag Hammadi codices as part of the Canon as they date from the 3rd and 4th centuries. This is the inevitable consequence of accepting minority readings based upon rationalistic presuppositions rather than Biblically established principles. Historically, believers when confronted by apparent contradictions in the Biblical text, have harmonized them out of respect for Divine authorship. Conservative scholars such as John Gill based their view of textual variants in line with primarily Scriptural presuppositions and then other external evidence like grammar and patristic citations. If we argue that God did not feel it was important to preserve all of His Words for all generations, then why would we believe He preserved 66 books in the canon or even the “*fundamental essential doctrines*” either?

Do anti-perfect preservationists really believe that God inspired the original, and then withdrew any intervention like a deistic creator of writing? However, this approach simply introduces other problems. We could not be certain that God did not inspire other books not in the Protestant Canon as we have accepted the premise that all God did was inspire and then was completely hands-off, leaving the rest to humanity to determine. With this pre-suppositional approach, we lose any ability to determine what is inspired and what is not. Indeed, if we believe God was involved how do we determine how much He was involved and if He stopped being involved or was only imperfectly preserving, when did He stop being fully involved? The Scriptures teach that God Sovereignly works in time to control revelation (*Gal 4:4; Eph 1:10*).

Canonicity was recognized by the true Church (*not Rome*) and the corollary of this must be that the Canonized Words must be recognized by the true Church and not Rome’s texts or apostate textual critics such as Westcott, Hort, Aland, Metzger etc (*I Cor. 2:12*). Instead we are commanded to cast down, “*imagination, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*” (*2 Cor 10:5*). Even in the Old

²¹ Paul Feinberg in *Inerrancy*, Norman L. Geisler ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 285.

Testament, God expressly forbids the world or strangers from handling His Holy Words placed inside the innermost and holiest apartment of the Ark of His testimony (*Num. 3:38*). Indeed, the Philistines could not abide having these pure Words in their cities but removed them (*1 Sam. 6*). God even punished good men who sought to handle His Words by unbiblical methods such as those used by the Philistines (*2 Sam 6:2-12*).

When we return to Biblical methods to handle the Words of God then He will bless (*1 Chron 15:12-15*). The Lord warns of attacks on His Words from those claiming the title of His spokesmen, “*behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that steal my words every one from his neighbour*” (*Jer 23:30*). The American Presbyterian Church rightly observes of B.B. Warfield’s evidential approach to the inspiration of Scripture, “*What do the Scriptures say about our approach to the world with God’s truth? To quote the Apostle Paul again, he says ‘The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty to the casting down of strongholds.’*” Warfield’s approach is exactly the opposite of what Paul’s statement requires. Warfield seeks to use carnal weapons to confront a hostile and unbelieving world with the truth of the Scriptures. How do the Scriptures say we are to convert men to the Christian faith? Is it by rationalistic argument in favor of Christianity? Is it by engaging in logical debate with respect to the benefits of the Christian religion? The answer is none of the above. The Scriptures says that ‘*faith*’, faith in Christianity, “*comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.*” It is by proclaiming the word of God as the word of God that God brings his elect to faith in Christ. The Bible makes it clear that men have hearts of stone. The Scriptures clearly teach that natural man has his understanding darkened and that when he is confronted with inescapable testimony to the existence and goodness of God he suppresses it in unrighteousness. As Paul states it, “*the natural does not receive the things of God.*” So Warfield’s attempt to convince unbelieving men of the truth of Christianity by rational argument is condemned by the Scriptures themselves. As the Apostle Peter put it the seed by which we are born again is the word of God. It is not the words of men.”²²

In the New Testament our Lord said it well, “*Can the blind lead the blind? Shall they not both fall into the ditch?*” (*Luke 6:39*). Job saw this more than three millennia ago, “*Who can bring a clean [thing] out of an unclean? not one*” (*Job 14:4*). Douglas Wilson puts it clearly also, “*a Conservative with this method may think the liberals have made the wrong judgments, but by sharing their method he affirms their right to judge. History shows that on this issue of rationalism those who share the methods of unbelievers come at some point to share their unbelief. Ideas have consequences*

²² “B. B. Warfield and the Doctrine of Inspiration” online at <http://www.americanpresbyterianchurch.org/inspiration.htm> accessed 20 February 2009.

— *and destinations.*”²³ If we refuse to let liberals preach in our pulpits, teach in our seminaries, then why would we accept their presuppositions for rationalistic textual criticism and their Bible translations? As the Lord warned, “*the have rejected the word of the LORD; and what wisdom is in them?*” (Jer 8:9). God has appointed the New Testament priesthood of believers (*not apostates*) as the guardians of His Words as Paul makes clear “*But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Tim 3:15). Indeed, it should be noted carefully that the duty of preserving God’s Words was specifically assigned to the priests not to the prophets, as all the Church is called to this task (*Deut 31:24-26; cf. John 16:13; Heb 10:16*).

—Rev. (Dr.) Paul Ferguson

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²³ Douglas Wilson, *Knowledge, Foreknowledge, and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Canon Press & Book Service, 1997) 17.