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Art. II.—THE RULE OF FAITH.

Canon of Scripture.

BY the word Canon (*κανών*) was meant originally, not a catalogue of the inspired writings, but the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, which were to be a rule or guide in public teaching: these sometimes, as in the Apostles' Creed, appear in short summaries, sometimes are referred to by individual writers (Irenæus, Tertullian, &c.), as well known and acknowledged by the churches. It is in this sense that St. Paul calls the measure of divine truth which the Philippian Church had attained to a Canon (Phil. iii. 16). Since this Canon of truth, whether inward in the heart or expressed in writing, derived all its validity from its presumed correspondence with what the Apostles had delivered orally; and since this latter, after the Apostles had departed from the scene of their earthly labours, could be found with certainty only in their own writings; it became a matter of vital moment to ascertain, with all care and diligence, what were these writings, which, when collected together, might for ever form an authentic record of Apostolic doctrine. The result of this pious labour is the volume of our New Testament, all the books of which we receive as they are commonly acknowledged. As regards the Old Testament, we accept the judgment of its proper historical guardians, and consequently exclude some of the books which the Council of Trent (Sess. iv., de can. ss.) admits, but which the Jews did not acknowledge as on a level with the others. The whole, as forming the standard of faith and morals, came to be called the Canon, and the writings contained in it, Canonical.

For the history of the formation of the Canon, or rather of the evidence to its existence from an early age (for the actual process of its formation is involved in obscurity), the reader is referred to works which treat expressly of the subject, such as Westcott on the Canon, and especially, on the Canon of the New Testament, Kirchhofer's excellent work. For our present purpose a mere sketch will be sufficient. And, to begin with the New Testament, we observe that from the first our present books are cited as *Scripture*—that is, as books *sui generis*, possessing an authority which belonged to no others; that they were publicly read in Christian assemblies as the Word of God; that catalogues were formed of them, of which thirteen, of a date previous to the fifth century, are extant, and which, though in some of them certain books are omitted, all agree in containing no other; and that the oldest version, the Peschito, contains these and no other books. Commentaries were written on them, and they were appealed to by heretics and unbelievers (with few exceptions), as well as by orthodox writers, as authentic records of the Christian religion.

Notwithstanding this general agreement as to what books were to be accounted Canonical, it is impossible to assign the particular time when the collection was made, or the persons who were engaged in it. No traces exist of this question having been formally discussed in any Council; that of Laodicea, A.D. 364, which has been improperly supposed to have fixed the Canon, merely giving a catalogue of the books already accepted. Unlike the books of the Old Testament, which were confined to a single nation, those of the New were addressed to churches scattered over the known world: time therefore was needed, both for a circulation of the books and for a general recognition of their authority. When to this we add the difficulties of transcription and communication, and the political disadvantages under which, for several centuries, Christianity laboured, preventing the assembling of any Council to determine this and similar questions, it cannot be matter of surprise that the Canon should only gradually have assumed its present form. One circumstance that must have retarded the work was the swarm of apocryphal writings which appeared soon after the Apostolic age, and which commonly laid claim to Apostolic origin. To sift the evidence for these spurious compositions must have been a work of no small difficulty; and it speaks highly for the diligence and judgment of the early Church, that none of them appear in the early catalogues, are quoted as Scripture by the early Fathers, or were read in the public assemblies of Christians.

The books which Eusebius, a writer of great research and impartiality, A.D. 315, calls ὁμολογουμένοι—that is, universally and without controversy admitted—are our present ones, with the exception of the Epistle to the Hebrews, that of St. James, the second of St. Peter, the second and third of St. John, and the Apocalypse; these latter, he says, were questioned by some, though received by the majority. They are just such as from their nature or contents we might expect to have been of tardier recognition. For either, like the Epistle to the Hebrews, those of St. James and St. Jude, and the Apocalypse, they do not expressly assert their Apostolic origin; or, like the second and third of St. John, they were addressed to individuals, not to churches, which evidently would render it more difficult to prove their genuineness. Whatever may be the deficiency of evidence in respect to these books, it must never be forgotten that it is comparative, and that those for which there is the least rest on testimony incomparably stronger than can be adduced for any apocryphal writing. Nor must it be forgotten that the very hesitation and reserve with which the disputed books were received adds weight to the judgment of the early Church, where it was unanimous. From the candidly expressed doubts of the three first centuries in regard to some books, we derive the same

benefit in estimating the claims of the rest as we do on the fact of our Lord's resurrection from the incredulity of St. Thomas.

Nevertheless, these disputed books cannot be placed exactly on a level with the rest. We admit them into the Canon as on the whole sufficiently attested, but we cannot now repair the disadvantage under which they labour, as having been not universally accepted by the ancient Church. The doubts which were then felt propagate themselves, unless additional evidence should come to light, which is not likely: *comparatively*, therefore, with the others, they occupy, as regards the external testimony, an inferior position. Hence they have been sometimes called Deutero-canonical. Chemnitz's remark deserves attention: "Ubi desunt primæ et veteris ecclesiæ firmæ et consentientes testificationes, sequens ecclesia, sicut non potest ex falsis facere vera, *ita nec ex dubiis potest certa facere*" (Exam. Conc. Trid. li. 22).

The Canon of the New Testament being established, that of the Old Testament to us Christians at once follows. For by our Lord and the Apostles our present books of it are quoted and classified, and no others. Amidst the censures which Christ directed against the Jews of that age, He never charged them with adding to or corrupting their Scriptures; by their traditions they frequently made "the Word of God of none effect," but the Word itself they left intact. Tradition points to the return from the Babylonish Captivity as the time when the task was undertaken of collecting the books of Scripture, which, through the destruction of the Temple, had become dispersed; and the same tradition makes Nehemiah and Ezra, especially the latter, principal agents in the prosecution of the task. To the collection thus formed, whether by Ezra or not, his own writings, together with those of Nehemiah and Malachi, which were written before Ezra's death, were added, and the Canon of the Old Testament thus completed. It was, with the exception of a few insignificant sects, acknowledged by the Jews throughout the world. Though a number of apocryphal writings, most of them of Alexandrian origin, appeared subsequently to the last of the Prophets, and some became incorporated in the LXX. translation, it does not appear that even in Egypt they ever obtained Canonical authority, and certainly not among the Jews of Palestine. It was, therefore, in disregard of the unanimous tradition of the appointed guardians of the Old Testament, as well as of the facts of history, that the Church of Rome pronounced, at the Council of Trent, that all the books contained in the Vulgate, apocryphal or otherwise, should, under pain of an anathema, be accounted as sacred and Canonical (Sess. iv. c. 1).

We now proceed to the properly dogmatical aspect of the question. On what grounds, let us ask, do we receive a book

as Canonical? The ultimate ground can be no other than our conviction that it is, or contains, the Word of God; in other words, that it is an authentic record, written under special inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of revealed religion, partially revealed under the Jewish, more fully under the Christian dispensation. This, however, only leads the way to the further question, How do we arrive at this conviction? The reply of the Romish Church is, that the authority of Scripture depends on the decision of the Church; or, in other words, that the canonicity, and therefore inspiration, of a book is to be admitted because the Church affirms it. It is true that this is not openly avowed in the decisions of the Council of Trent, but it is virtually assumed. For when the Council anathematizes all who do not receive as sacred and Canonical—*e.g.*, the books of Tobias, Judith, Wisdom, and the two books of the Maccabees—which notoriously never had a place in the Jewish Canon (*i.e.*, the original Hebrew), and were never unanimously accepted by the ancient Christian Church, but, on the contrary, were tacitly rejected by those Fathers who were acquainted with Hebrew, and who made the subject their special study (*e.g.*, Jerome, whose catalogue agrees with ours,[1] it is obvious that it really claims the power of fixing the Canon by its own plenary authority. It is only an accident how far the power may be exercised. The Council stops short at certain books which, no doubt, have been esteemed in theChurch; but the *principle* may be extended to any books, no matter what their contents or what the attestation they enjoy. For the principle is, that the existing Church of Rome is the final court of appeal to decide what books are to be esteemed Canonical and what not.

Against this principle the Reformed Churches protest. In the first place, whatever may be due to the authority of the Church in this matter, it is certainly not the existing Romish Church, nor the Romish Church of the sixteenth century, from which we receive the Canon; but from that early Church which makes no pretensions to be an independent infallible authority, but exercises its functions only in connexion with the facts of history. The Tridentine Fathers were in no better position to determine these questions than we are. But, in the next place, the Reformers denied that *any* Church, or even the Church Catholic, possesses the authority claimed. By them the function of the Church, in relation to Scripture, is defined to be "a keeper and a witness" thereof (Art. XX.): a keeper, inasmuch as to its custody the sacred records are committed, to be jealously

[1] The apocryphal books found an entrance into the LXX. version, and thence passed into the old Latin translation, from which they were received into the Vulgate.

guarded from addition, mutilation, or depravation ; and a witness, inasmuch as it is incumbent on the Church to hand down, from age to age, the chain of evidence which proves these books, and no others, to have been from the first acknowledged. So far, no doubt, it is, as a rule, the Church that first introduces her members to the knowledge of the Bible, and moreover accompanies this introduction with her own attestation to its supernatural origin and priceless value; but this is a very different thing from assuming a power to *make* a book Canonical by a simple authoritative decision. The Church, in this matter, discharges a function resembling that of the Samaritan woman in John iv., who invited her fellow-townsmen to come and see a man who had told her all that ever she did: she was the means, or occasion, of their becoming acquainted with the Messiah, but she did not make Him what He was, nor could she produce saving faith in them; they believed, when they did believe, not because of the woman's saying, but because they had heard Him themselves, and perceived that it was indeed the Christ (v. 42). The Scripture is never fully received on its proper grounds until a similar personal experience is wrought in its readers.

It must not be dissembled that the witness of the Church to the canonicity of a book comes to us with a great weight of authority (authority in the classical sense of the word "auctoritas"—viz., weight and prevailing moral influence), though not with that claimed for it by the Council of Trent; but it is important to point out wherein this authority lies. The nearness of the primitive Church to Apostolic times, its knowledge of the original Greek, the sources of evidence then accessible which now no longer exist, and other like *external* advantages over us, are no doubt of great moment; but they by no means exhaust the question. If they did, *any* body of historical testimony, say of heathen writers, possessing the same advantages, would be of equal value. The witness of the Church is valuable because it is that of the *Church*—that is, of the body which possesses by covenant promise the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the same Divine Agent who inspired the books. The Church, therefore, of the Apostolic age had a spiritual perception and tact which, independently in a measure of external testimony, enabled it to discriminate between the genuine writings of the Apostles or Apostolic men and spurious compositions; and no other body but the Church could exercise this gift. It was by its exercise that such a writing as the Epistle to the Hebrews, of which the human author, the *auctor secundarius*, is doubtful, gained admittance into the Canon, while others bearing the names of eminent Apostles were rejected. Neither species of evidence produced its effect apart

from the other: the historical led to the internal, the internal confirmed the historical; a reciprocal action was constantly going on, the result of which was the final settlement of the Canon. This process of mutual confirmation is nothing but what also occurs in art and literature. For example—a picture known to be by Raphael commends itself at once to a cultivated taste; and a cultivated taste, without knowing the painter, assigns such a picture to the bloom, not to the decadence of the art. So a book written by an Apostle, in the exercise of his office as an inspired teacher, strikes a corresponding chord in the spiritual mind; and a spiritual mind, even if the name of the author be not certain, feels no hesitation in accepting the testimony of the early Church as to the Apostolic parentage of such a book.

And this internal evidence, or, as our older divines term it, the *testimonium Spiritus sancti* in Scripture, is ever repeating itself, and is as valid now as it was in the first century. For the presence of the Holy Ghost is not confined to any age of the Church; we also believe that we enjoy His gracious influences, and with them the power of discerning the voice of the Spirit in Scripture. Hence Protestant theologians are careful to distinguish between the external evidence which can only produce an historical faith (*fides humana*), and the witness of the Holy Ghost Himself in Scripture, on which, in the last resort, our conviction of its divine origin is founded, and which alone can produce a spiritual persuasion (*fides divina*). The Holy Spirit in the word and the Holy Spirit in the heart answer one to the other as sound and echo, or as voice to voice; Christians have the mind of Christ, and therefore know, as none else can, the things of the Spirit—that is, of Christ (John xvi. 14; 1 Cor. ii. 14–16); and the testimony thus furnished by Scripture itself is direct and conclusive, it being presupposed that the external testimony corroborates, or does not militate against it. Those who disparage it may be asked how else the Romish argument is to be met, that we Protestants first appeal to the Church to declare what is Scripture, and then on the authority of Scripture proceed to reject some of the traditions of the Church (*i.e.*, the Romish Church). Since by the term "Church" the Romanist means that portion of it of which the Pope is the acknowledged head, this argument, as *against him*, must be met in the manner indicated above; it is not on the authority of the Church of Rome, as distinguished from any other existing Church of Christendom, that we receive a book as Canonical. But the argument, in its essence, may be used by those who are not Romanists for a different purpose. Let the supposition be made, that the Christianity, say of the third and fourth centuries, as it appears in the pages of the great writers of that age, is not exactly that

of St. Paul or St. John; that, in fact, judged by the Apostolic standard, it exhibits, at any rate, germs of error, which afterwards blossomed into noxious fruit. Those who, notwithstanding their apparent discrepancy with the inspired writings, hold these developments to be legitimate and salutary, may urge against their opponents the very argument which the Romanist uses, and on better grounds; they may say, You admit that you receive the Scriptures on the testimony of the Church of the early centuries, and yet, after having done so, you proceed, on the authority of the Scriptures, to condemn the Christianity of those ages on certain salient points. The reply, then, must advance further than merely to meet the Romish claim, and be to the effect that we do not accept a book as the Word of God solely on the testimony even of the early Church. Even the latter is but the outer tabernacle through which we pass to the Holy of Holies, and not the very interior sanctuary where the presence of God speaks for itself. Though, therefore, we receive this testimony with the greatest respect and deference, we retain the right of criticizing the prevalent Christianity of those times from the sacred volume itself which has thus come down to us; just as the Jews scrupulously cherished the prophetical books of their Canon, which books present a most unflattering picture of the moral and religious state of this people. The early Church, consciously or unconsciously, handed down the antidote to its own errors; and the same may be said of every Church which transmits the Holy Scriptures in their integrity. Once in possession of the sacred touchstone, we apply it, without hesitation, to test the Christianity even of the transmitters; we are thankful for the gift of the volume, and for the care taken to convey it to us intact, but we refuse to be tied to that *interpretation* of it which even the primitive Church may have sanctioned. Nor would this Church have demanded such a sacrifice from us. It may have erred *materially* on some points or in some features; but in its *formal* principle it would have been one with us: a Cyprian, an Augustine, or a Chrysostom may not be safe guides on all points, but they would have been the first to say, Let whatever we write be judged by the Holy Scriptures; if it is consistent with them, let it be accepted—if not, let it be rejected. And if the early Church, as represented in its great writers, appears not to have perceived its deviations, if any, from the inspired standard, and sincerely thought it had faithfully reproduced that standard, this is an error common to the Church of every age. The Jews read their prophets, but failed to correct thereby the prevalent errors of their religious faith and practice. We ourselves possess the blessing of an open Bible, to which we attach the supreme authority in matters of faith, and yet English Christianity may

be defective as compared with the Apostolic standard, fresh from inspiration. The Bible is far from having spoken its last word to Christendom. In a word, we do not, we cannot, allow the external testimony even of the primitive Church, even of the Church universal, to be the ultimate ground of our reception of a book as Canonical. Such objectors, too, may be asked how—otherwise than by the direct testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Word—are the laity, who have neither time nor ability for learned researches, ever to arrive at a happy persuasion that the words they read are a message from God?

That the principle is capable of abuse may be true. It is not properly applied when a professed discerning of the mind of the Holy Spirit in a book is held of itself to warrant its admittance into the Canon; or, to state the same thing from the converse side, if, because we fancy that we do not discern the Holy Spirit in a book, we conclude that we are at once at liberty to reject it, as Luther rejected the Epistle of St. James, because it did not come up to his conception of what a Canonical book should be. But the error lies, as is often the case, not in the principle itself, but in the misapplication of it. A book which comes down to us, on probable testimony, as the work of an Apostle, written in the exercise of his office or under his immediate superintendence, and on that ground assigned a place in the Canon by the early Church, cannot be set aside on the adverse judgment of any *single* Christian. For if such a one should profess that he discerns in it no trace of inspiration, the answer must be, that no individual Christian possesses a monopoly of the Holy Spirit, and that it is more probable that he should be mistaken than that the whole Church should have gone wrong. It would be a serious thing indeed if the *whole Church* were to come round to his opinion; but this is exactly what has never occurred as regards any Canonical book. We must believe, then, that it was Luther's own fault if he failed to find spiritual nutriment in the Epistle of St. James, rather than that the Epistle is defective in internal evidence. We must not put asunder what God has joined together, or invert the order which Divine Providence has established in this matter. The Epistle of St. James, or the Apocalypse, reaches our hands as part of the Canon, admitted into it by that age which had the best means of deciding on its pretensions, and accepted by all Christian Churches. It comes, therefore, with a *primâ facie* weight of evidence in its favour—evidence partly, as we must believe, founded, as regards those who admitted the book, on the very same internal witness of the Holy Spirit which we demand. From this its position it cannot be deposed except by a verdict of the Church universal; and this cannot now be obtained,

partly on account of the divisions that prevail in Christendom, and partly because the *historical* evidence on which the early Church decided is, in a great measure, no longer extant; a plain intimation of Providence that we are not to make our private—or, in modern phrase, "subjective"—notions the sole ground of our acceptance or rejection of a book. And so, though the external attestation and the internal testimony are not the same, and the one is not complete without the other, we yet are warranted in believing that, in point of fact, no one who, taking into his hands a book which has been accepted as Canonical by the *whole* Church, proceeds in a humble and devout spirit to study its contents, will eventually fail to perceive therein the witness of the Holy Spirit.

It must be admitted that, in some instances, it is the external testimony on which we have chiefly to rely. It might be difficult, *e.g.*, to maintain that the books of Joshua, or of Ruth, though we hold them to be inspired, reflect their own light, or convey a conviction of their origin, so forcibly as the Gospel of St. John or the Epistles of St. Paul; and the same may be said of some books even of the New Testament, as compared with others. The testimony of the Spirit in these is more latent, does not appeal so directly to the spiritual instinct, and therefore we are compelled to make up for the deficiency by leaning more upon the historical attestation.

It is to be noted, finally, that there is reason to believe that the office of inspired men was not only to write themselves as the Holy Spirit prompted, but to authenticate the writings of their predecessors; a circumstance which may be thought to be hinted at in the well-known passage of Josephus:—"From the time of Artaxerxes to the present day, books of various kinds have appeared, but they are not esteemed of equal authority with the more ancient, because since that time the legitimate succession of prophets has failed." As long as this succession continued, inquirers had an infallible authority to appeal to on the question whether a book was inspired or not. Every reader of the Old Testament will have observed how often passages from the earlier prophets are quoted by the later ones, and thus receive an inspired attestation. In like manner St. Peter authenticates St. Paul's Epistles (2 Pet. iii. 15, 16); and it was doubtless ordered by the providence of God that St. John should survive to see the Canon of the New Testament virtually completed, and to give it his imprimatur.

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