

One New Book for the Preacher

David N. Mosser

First United Methodist Church, De Leon, Texas

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: ITS ORIGIN,
DEVELOPMENT, AND SIGNIFICANCE, by Bruce Manning Metzger.
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. 326 pages, \$49.95.

Christian history and Christian theology have their major intersection in the New Testament. Too often Christian scripture has been accepted by believers as a given. Taking a closer look at the history of faith, however, one is struck by the fact that questions regarding scripture and its interpretation are at the heart of that history.

In light of its fundamental importance to the faith, it is not surprising that in this decade there has been a remarkable revival in the biblical story. This is so well-documented that further comment is unnecessary. What is of greater interest is people's reaction to this general biblical revival. There seem to be three basic responses. One response is to ignore this new movement. The reflection on these questions has either been decided intellectually long ago or is too painful to reconsider. Another response, in a different direction, has been to embrace the Bible in such a way as to make claims for it which it does not make for itself. The third alternative, which neither ignores the scripture nor makes it into an idol, is the middle ground of hearing the scripture speak from its own context and out of its own authority.

Bruce Metzger has provided for his readers a concise, yet thorough, account of why and how our New Testament came to be regarded as holy scripture. He writes not about how the books of the New Testament were written, but about the circumstances under which they came to be recognized as scripture. With ample footnotes and secondary references, this is a thoroughly documented book. In fact, part one of *The Canon of the New Testament* is devoted to a survey of the literature on the canon. This portion is divided into two chapters: literature on the canon published prior to the twentieth century and literature published during this century. I quickly came to appreciate Metzger's writing ability in this section. He has taken a great amount of complicated material and presented it in a manner which is easy to follow. This accomplishment alone recommends his book.

The plan of the rest of his book is simple. After the survey of pertinent literature, Metzger presents the formation of the canon with careful detail. The book's second part begins by summarizing the contributions of the Apostolic Fathers, both in the East and the West. Then the Gnostic and other heretical influences, as well as the two most influential lists of early New Testament books, complete part two. These two lists are the Muratorian Canon and the list of New Testament books by the Church historian Eusebius. The

concluding section may be the most interesting portion of Metzger's work, for it is here where the substantial theological and historical questions are addressed most fully. Among a cluster of appropriate questions comes the climactic one: Is the canon a collection of authoritative books or is the canon an authoritative collection of books? Completing the volume are four appendixes and an index.

If one is wondering why I have been so detailed with regard to the contents of this book, it is simply to assist those considering whether or not to spend fifty dollars for a book. If one were to spend this kind of money on "one new book for the preacher," then this would be the one.

I make this recommendation for four reasons. First, though comparisons can devalue people, Bruce Metzger must rank at the forefront of this century's New Testament scholars. Having served on two committees of the Revised Standard Version, as the New Testament editor, he has for fifty years been at the heart of the topics discussed in his book. Read as conservative by some academics, I find his writings both deliberate and careful.

Second, the quality of writing allows this book to recommend itself. The sheer depth and breadth of these materials could easily come to overwhelm any writer's attempt to control them. Yet, despite the historical detail and subsequent history of canonical interpretation, Metzger's clear and controlled writing lets the reader follow the facts with ease. In fact, I have turned toward other works of his.

A third recommendation for this book is the light which it sheds on the New Testament from the archaeological findings of the last thirty years. Given the new methods in computer research and Metzger's familiarity with the apocryphal literature in both testaments, much new material is presented. This new material is both sifted and interpreted by Metzger. By doing so he helps put these new writings and methodologies into the wider perspective of biblical scholarship.

The fourth and last recommendation may be the most important one for preachers who attempt to proclaim the old Word to a new world. Biblical preaching presupposes a canon of sacred texts. We who have this task and privilege must strive to understand both the human and divine natures of the writings we hold to be sacred. That is, we strive to understand the writings we regard as the revelation of God in human experience. Also, we strive to understand the content of the scriptures and the implications for Christian life. Beyond the "story" of scripture, we also struggle to discover in what form the content comes to us. *The Canon of the New Testament* gives us a picture of the process by which God through human beings struggled to delineate what would be sacred scripture and what would not.

A final thought might address pastors and preachers who must deal with many people and many opinions about the Bible. Bruce Metzger's book has given us a solid foundation upon which to develop our thought. Since Christian proclamation is based upon holy scripture, an understanding of canonical issues, both historical and theological, is necessary to any faithful witness. This book will help those who want or need to come to terms with the process of

how we received our Bible. The knowledge this book conveys will give any preacher more confidence in dealing with these holy texts and how they came to be authorized by Christ's Church.