

“These Holy Books”

An Exposition of Articles Four and Six of the Belgic Confession.

Article 4 - The Canonical Books

We include in the Holy Scripture the two volumes of the Old and New Testaments. They are canonical books with which there can be no quarrel at all. In the church of God the list is as follows:

In the Old Testament, the five books of Moses—

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy;

The books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth;

The two books of Samuel, the two books of Kings, the two books of Chronicles;

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther;

The book of Job,

The Psalms,

The three books of Solomon—

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs;

The five books of the four major prophets—

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel;

The books of the twelve minor prophets—

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

In the New Testament,

The four Gospels—

Matthew, Mark, Luke, John;

The Acts of the Apostles;

The Thirteen letters of Paul—

to the Romans; the two letters to the Corinthians; to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians; the two letters to the Thessalonians; the two letters to Timothy; to Titus, Philemon;

The letter to the Hebrews;

The seven letters of the other apostles—

One of James; two of Peter; three of John; one of Jude; and the Revelation of the apostle John.

Article 6 - The Difference Between the Canonical and Apocryphal Books

We distinguish between these holy books and the apocryphal ones, which are:

The third and fourth books of Esdras; the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Jesus Sirach, Baruch; what was added to the Story of Esther; the Song of the Three Children in the Furnace; the Story of Susannah; the Story of Bel and the Dragon; the Prayer of Manasseh; and the two books of Maccabees.

The church may certainly read these books and learn from them as far as they agree with the canonical books. But they do not have such power and virtue that one could confirm from their testimony any point of faith or of the Christian religion. Much less can they detract from the authority of the other holy books.

The theological equivalent of the age-old question, “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” is the question, “which comes first, the church or the canon of Scripture?” This was a pressing issue when the *Belgic Confession* was written, and it remains a pressing issue today. Does the authority of the church precede the authority of Scripture? Does the church give the Bible its authority and determine the extent of the canon? Or is the Holy Spirit alone fit to bear witness to those books which owe their origin to the inspiration of God? These are important questions.

As we saw in Article Three of our confession, when we speak of the inspiration of Scripture we mean that Scripture is breathed forth by God through the agency of various human writers. This is done in such a way that what the human writers produce are the very words of God. Yet this does not sublimate the author’s personality nor override the historical circumstances at the time of their writing. The very essence of Holy Scripture is that it has its origin in the will of God, not in the will of men. Because God breathes-forth Holy Scripture, the Bible comes to us with the full authority of its divine author. In the Bible, God speaks to us in words and sentences, revealing to us his will (the law), as well as revealing to us how he saves sinners from the guilt and power of sin through the person and work of Jesus Christ (the gospel). This is why Scripture alone is suitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). This is why we base what we believe and confess solely upon God’s word, and not upon mere human opinion or religious experience.

We skipped ahead from Article Three to Article Five of our confession, which deals with the authority of Scripture. Since Scripture is God-breathed, its divine author, the Holy Spirit, bears witness to the fact

that the various books of our Bible are the product of God's breathing forth his word, through the agency of the biblical writers. This means that the church does not give the Bible its authority when it "officially" declares the Bible to be God's word written. Rather the church can only recognize the authority that Scripture already inherently possesses, because God has breathed it forth and because the content of Scripture, the law and the gospel, reveal to us Jesus Christ who is the head of his church. Jesus founds his church upon the authority of Holy Scripture, not on the authority of Popes and cardinals.

The Holy Spirit confirms that Scripture comes from God (the "witness" of the Spirit), wherein, the Spirit ensures that we hear God's voice in and through his word. But the witness of the Holy Spirit does not take place in a vacuum. Our confession makes the point in Article Five that Scripture contains within itself evidence for its own inspiration—these are all the passages wherein the Bible speaks of its own inspiration and authority—but there is also a massive amount of external evidence which supports the historical claims of the Bible. Indeed, there is so much external evidence for the inspiration and authority of the Bible (fulfilled prophecy and miracle) that our confession contends that even the blind can see it, although, because of human sin, people prejudicially reject the evidence for the truth of the Bible unless the Holy Spirit enables them to accept it.

But any discussion of the inspiration and authority of the Bible inevitably brings us to a discussion of the canon of Holy Scripture and to the sufficiency of Scripture (the latter is the subject of Article Seven. Those books (but only those books), which have their origin in the will of God, come to us with the authority of God. These are the books to which the Holy Spirit bears witness. This is why they are to be collected and circulated so as to be read in the churches, and to give preachers content for preaching. These books serve as the witness to Jesus Christ, who is the foundation of the church (to paraphrase Ephesians 2:20).

But you cannot speak of the inspiration and authority of the Bible without talking about the extent of the canon of Scripture and the sufficiency of Scripture. What books were given by divine inspiration? This is why Article Four of our confession lists the canonical books and why Article Six describes why we, as Protestants, reject the apocryphal books. We will take both articles together, since they treat the same subject, the canon of Holy Scripture.

There are three main issues which frame our confession's discussion in articles four and six of the canonical books of Holy Scripture and the rejection of the Apocrypha. The first two issues are historical, while the third is theological.

The first historical issue underlying our confession's discussion of the Canon of Scripture has to do with the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation. When, in 1561, Guido De Bres addressed the subject of Canon of Scripture in our confession, the Canons and Decrees of the *Council of Trent* dealing with the canon had only recently been promulgated by the Roman Catholic Church (April of 1546).¹ While this comes as a surprise to many, the fourth session of Trent issued the first authoritative listing of biblical books in the history of the church.²

¹ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, IV, cited in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), II.80-81.

² Richard Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 395.

While the identity of the biblical canon of the New Testament was firmly established early on due to controversies with the heretic Marcion (who developed his own greatly abridged list of canonical books) and the Gnostics (who claimed to possess the secret teachings of Jesus and the Apostles in a number of specious writings which claimed to be missing gospels or epistles of various apostles) until the council of Trent in 1546, the church had never “officially” listed canonical books. Nor had the church ever affirmed a rule or standard to determine which books should be considered to be Holy Scripture.³ This was especially problematic when it came to the Old Testament, because of the wide circulation of what we now call “the Apocrypha,” named from the Greek word, *esoterica* meaning “hidden things.”⁴

Since the extent of canon was never really defined until the time of the Reformation, medieval Bibles often included writings of the church fathers, such as the *Didache* or the *Shepherd of Hermas*, along with Old Testament books now considered by Protestants to be apocryphal. Further complicating the matter is the fact that the Reformation followed closely on the heels of the Renaissance and the new discipline of biblical studies was only beginning to flourish. The study of the biblical text in the original languages raised a number of questions about the nature of Scripture and brought the question of the extent of the canon to the fore. Recall that theological discourse at the time was conducted in Latin and yet the Scriptures were originally written in Greek (the New Testament) or Hebrew (the Old Testament). While Rome’s official Bible was the Latin Vulgate, and included a number of the current apocryphal books, the Vulgate’s translator, Jerome, did not consider the apocryphal books to be Scripture.⁵

Furthermore, the study of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament also broke new ground since most biblical scholars of the period did not know Hebrew, but worked from the Septuagint (LXX) which was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Since the Septuagint included the Apocrypha, and since the Vulgate included some of these books as well, Roman theologians naturally gravitated toward the larger canon—the sixty-six books accepted by Protestants, plus what Rome calls the “Deutero-Canonical” books, which we call the Apocrypha, and which up until recently were bound in Protestant Bibles in a section between the Old and New Testaments, clearly identified as “the Apocrypha.”

When the *Council of Trent* issued the first official list of biblical books in 1546, and included the Apocrypha in the list (these books are mentioned by name in Article Six of our confession), this was clearly a response to the burgeoning Protestant movement which had been forced to address questions regarding the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, and in doing so, challenged Rome’s view that the church’s authority was greater than that of Scripture. Not only do Protestants believe that the authority of Scripture is prior to the authority of the church, but Protestants also rejected the Apocrypha as Scripture for a number of reasons.

The most important reason to reject the Apocrypha is that these books are never quoted by Jesus or the Apostles in the New Testament. But there are other reasons as well. In Romans 3:2, Paul states that the Jews “*have been entrusted with the very words of God.*” But these “words of God” never included the Apocrypha, since the Palestinian Jews rejected these books as authoritative. Another reason is that in chapter 4:4-6 of Malachi’s prophecy—the last book in the canonical Old Testament—Malachi speaks of the

³ Muller, Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 2, Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology, 389-418.

⁴ ISBE, s.v. “Apocrypha”

⁵ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 57.

next event of redemptive history as the coming of Elijah, i.e., John the Baptist. Malachi's prophecy closes the Old Testament canon, and yet, all of the apocryphal books were written after Malachi's prophecy was written.⁶ The only reason Rome recognized the apocryphal books was to help justify what would otherwise be regarded as unbiblical doctrines.

While Protestants came to affirm *sola Scripture*, Rome rejected the notion outright, because for Rome, Scripture and church tradition serve as dual authorities. Protestants have always argued that in practice whenever Scripture and tradition teach things which conflict with one another, church tradition always prevails. This is why Rome not only regarded the authority of the church as both historically and logically prior to Scripture, this explains why the Protestant confessions from this period, such as ours, go to such great lengths to define the inspiration and authority of Scripture in such a way as to confess that Scripture alone is infallible (not the church) and that Scripture's authority precedes and establishes the doctrinal authority of the church.

Any discussion of the extent of the canon must be connected to the inspiration of Scripture and not to the authority of the church. While it is easy to overlook, when Protestant confessions affirm the canonical books of Scripture and reject the Apocrypha as being "God-breathed," they are directly challenging the self-professed authority of the Roman Catholic church. Despite Rome's declaration to the contrary, these books have not been breathed forth by God, they contain strange things, and the Spirit does not bear witness to their divine authorship. While they may be valuable historically, they cannot be considered Holy Scripture, nor as part of the canon. The church cannot give them any authority which they do not already have. Our confession speaks of them in Article Six as follows: "The church may certainly read these books and learn from them as far as they agree with the canonical books. But they do not have such power and virtue that one could confirm from their testimony any point of faith or of the Christian religion. Much less can they detract from the authority of the other holy books."

The second historical matter which serves as background of our confession has to do with the radical Anabaptists and the kingdom of Münster—a theme to which we will return on a number of occasions. We need to be clear from the outset, that the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century bear little resemblance to modern Baptist evangelicals. While most Anabaptists were simple and pious folk who loved Jesus, this movement also included many we would consider radical Pentecostals with a bent toward anarchy.

Rejecting the sacrament of infant baptism, hence the name Anabaptist (re-baptizer), many of the Anabaptists during this time believed that they were living in the last days and that the end of the world was at hand. Early in the 1530's, followers of one of the most influential Anabaptist preachers (many of whom were from Holland), Melchior Hoffman, managed to take over the city of Münster in Westphalia (Germany). Hated and persecuted by most local governments, Anabaptist refuges had been openly welcomed in Münster where many of them congregated, a decision which was soon to be regretted.

One of the more radical followers of Hoffman, a certain Jan Matthys (from Haarlem in the Netherlands), advocated taking up the sword to kill all the ungodly people living in Münster in preparation for the earthly millennium soon to dawn. Clearer heads briefly prevailed and so all Lutherans and Catholics were forcibly expelled from the city, rather than face execution as Matthys had urged. It was not long before chaos reigned. Private property was confiscated, all books but the Bible were burned. Law and order broke down in the name of establishing God's kingdom on the earth.

⁶ See the arguments set forth in Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 56-57.

But the most radical of all the Anabaptists in the kingdom of Münster was John of Leyden, who claimed to be a prophet, took fifteen wives (including the wife of Jan Matthys), named himself king and the former Mrs. Matthys queen, and then ran naked through the streets before falling into a trance for three days and nights.⁷ All of this was done, of course, in the name of Christ and at the supposed leading of the Holy Spirit, who, John argued, was even then establishing the kingdom of God upon the earth.⁸

What began, as one writer puts it, as a kind of religious comedy, now turned to a horror story which impacted all of Europe for decades to come.⁹ Facing eviction from his church in Münster, the local bishop appealed to nearby city states for help. It was not long before a group of allied armies laid siege to the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster. During the siege, famine killed many of the citizens of the self-proclaimed New Israel, before the assembled armies finally stormed the city in June of 1536 and restored order. The allied armies captured King John of Leyden, before putting him to death with red-hot irons some months later—the penalty for heresy and anarchy. Many of John’s followers resisted and were slaughtered along with their leader.

As you can imagine, this horrible incident shocked all of Europe and not only completely discredited Anabaptism as a theological movement, but provided Roman Catholic princes throughout all of Europe with an excuse to use military force against all Protestants, even those, who, like the Reformed, rejected the Anabaptist view of civil government for many of the same reasons that Rome did. Whenever Guido De Bres and the other ministers of the Reformed church of the Netherlands rejected something taught by Rome as expressed in our confession of faith, it was done against the backdrop of the tragedy of the kingdom of Münster. De Bres himself was put to death by Spanish Authorities for daring to serve communion to Reformed exiles. There is little doubt that the persecution of Protestants would not have been nearly so harsh were it not for the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster.

Therefore in our confession, De Bres must be very clear that in rejecting Rome’s erroneous view that the church’s authority precedes that of Holy Scripture, the Reformed are not thereby endorsing the scandalous anarchy of the Anabaptists. When our confession rejects Rome’s view of the authority of the church and the extent of the canon, De Bres is very careful to point out that we are not embracing an Anabaptist view that the Spirit somehow speaks directly to Christians apart from God’s word or that all civil authority is illegitimate. Rather, our confession affirms what the church has always affirmed, that Scripture is authoritative, because it is God breathed, and by doing so, making the case that the Reformed cannot be equated with the Anabaptist radicals who reject Scripture’s normative authority. In listing the canonical books of the Bible and basing their authority in the will of God (and not the authority of the church), we are not only challenging Rome, we are rejecting the Anabaptist notion that the Spirit speaks apart from the word of God written.

The third issue which frames both Articles Four and Six of our confession, is a theological one, and that is the fact that no single biblical text lists the canonical books. It would make this entire discussion much easier, if I could take you to John chapter 23, and say about verse 1, “here, Jesus lists for us all of the Old

⁷ See the book by Anthony Arthur, The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Munster (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

⁸ Lewis W. Spitz, The Renaissance and Reformation Movements: Volume 2, The Reformation (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 400-404.

⁹ Spitz, The Renaissance and Reformation Movements: Volume 2, The Reformation, 403.

Testament books and which books should be included in the New.” There is no such chapter in John’s gospel and there is no such list of canonical books.

Given what was said in Articles Three and Five about the inspiration and authority of the Bible, all of the questions associated with which writings are Scripture, which books are historical and useful but do not have the authority of Scripture (like the Apocrypha), and which books are altogether spurious (which we call the *pseudopigrapha*—false writings, like the Gospel of Thomas), must be answered by looking to the nature of Scripture and not to the authority of the church.

Even though a number of biblical critics convey the idea that the Bible is missing certain books which the church prevented from being included because these writings might be embarrassing, such is not the case. The fascination with “lost books” of the Bible should not surprise us in a culture so enamored with conspiracy theories. The fact of the matter is that the early debates in the church about the canon centered exclusively around only seven books in our New Testament (2 and 3 John, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Jude and Revelation). There was never any question raised about the authenticity of any of the gospels, the Book of Acts, the letters of Paul, nor the first epistles of John and Peter, and these letters are in themselves sufficient to found the church, because they so clearly contain the gospel.

The other letters were questioned for a time in remote parts of the empire because not all the books reached all the churches by an early date (shortly after they were written). Some churches did not accept the Book of Revelation or the Book of James because they had received them only recently and did not know of their history nor of their apostolic origins. This is something we should surely expect in an age without mass communication or transportation. These churches gladly received these books upon learning that others had known of them from the beginning. Hebrews was not accepted by some, because no one really knew who authored it. 2 Peter looked a lot like Jude and so on. But the idea that the canon of Scripture was formed through some kind of conspiracy by church leaders to exclude books which taught things which might have cast doubt upon the church or its gospel is simply nonsense and best relegated to an *A & E* documentary. God not only breathed-forth Holy Scripture, in his providence he ensured that the churches collected and circulated those letters which he breathed-forth.

It is vital to consider that this process of canonization was not a kind of after-thought on the part of God’s people. In Deuteronomy 4:1-14, we read that the LORD Himself declares that he is giving Israel his decrees and laws, that these decrees and laws will establish the nation and secure his blessing, and that YHWH’s word is not to be forgotten nor added to. Not only are the people of Israel to keep God’s laws, and remember all of his great and mighty deeds, but the Israelites are to regularly assemble and hear these words before recounting them for their children.

As Meredith Kline has pointed out, the very act of God giving such revelation not only confirms his covenant promises and warns of covenant curses, but there is no way whatsoever to separate covenant legislation from the formation of a canon of Holy Scripture. If God makes a covenant with his people through the means of divine speech and the giving of the two tables of the law (God’s word written), then the Lord is breathing-forth Holy Scripture which, by that fact alone, is rendered canonical, and which regulates the conduct and the faith of God’s people.¹⁰ After God spoke to them, there was never any question on the part of the Israelites, “hey, should we put this in our Bible?” God had spoken. The very fact that he did so created the canon of Holy Scripture. You cannot separate the making of a covenant

¹⁰ Meredith G. Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 27-93.

from the breathing forth of Holy Scripture.

If we move forward in redemptive history to the messianic ministry of Jesus, by that time, God had already breathed forth the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, repeatedly referred to by the New Testament authors as the Law and the Prophets. Take for example Luke 24:44, where Jesus says about himself, *“these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”* This statement by Jesus, presupposes the canon of the Old Testament as set forth in our confession, including the books of Moses (the Pentateuch), the prophets (the other books) along with the Psalter. The Apocrypha is excluded by our Lord’s statement.

In John’s gospel (John 16:12-13), Jesus speaks in such a way as to indicate that the canon of the Old Testament is about to be enlarged by the Holy Spirit, spoken of by Jesus as “the Spirit of truth.” Says Jesus, *“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”* At the very least, Jesus is stating that when he goes away, new revelation will come in the form of God-breathed Holy Scripture, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who will bring certain things to remembrance.

Given Jesus’ reference to the canon of the Old Testament and to the forth-coming canon of the New, one thing ought to now be clear. The church was not formed by the disciples. It was founded by Jesus. And because it was founded by Jesus (who gave them the Old Testament as their infallible rule), the church was never without a canon of Scripture. The very idea that the church determined and defined the canon as a form of censorship in the midst of power-struggle is patently false.¹¹

Given the fact that the church was given a canon by Jesus, and that Jesus spoke of additional revelation yet to come, we should not be surprised when the apostle Peter tells us, “it was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look” (1:12). Or when Paul states “we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13). Paul, for example, believed that apostolic teachings were authoritative (2 Thessalonians 2:15, cf. also 1 Thessalonians 4:2; II Thessalonians 3:14; I Corinthians 15:37).

In his second letter, Peter states: *“count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures”* (2 Peter 3:15-16). Even Peter regarded Paul’s letters as being on the same footing as the Old Testament, i.e. that they are

¹¹ According to B. B. Warfield, “The Christian church did not require to form for itself the idea of a ‘canon,’ -- or, as we should more commonly call it, of a ‘Bible,’-- that is, of a collection of books given of God to be the authoritative rule of faith and practice. It inherited this idea from the Jewish church, along with the thing itself, the Jewish Scriptures, or the ‘Canon of the Old Testament.’ The church did not grow up by natural law; it was founded. And the authoritative teachers sent forth by Christ to found His church, carried with them, as their most precious possession, a body of divine Scriptures, which they imposed on the church they founded as its code of law. No reader of the New Testament can need proof of this; on every page of that book is spread the evidence that from the beginning the Old Testament was as cordially recognized as law by the Christian as a Jew. The Christian church thus was never without a ‘Bible’ or a ‘canon.’ Cf. Warfield, “The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament,” 411.

Scripture.

Add to this the fact that the early church was extremely careful to distinguish true doctrine from false doctrine, and it is clear that the authors of the New Testament were fully aware of an increasing canon, of inspired books to be collected, circulated and read in the churches along with the Old Testament.¹²

Our fathers in the faith were absolutely correct to accept the canon of the Old Testament given to the church by its founder, Jesus Christ, (the books of Moses, the writings of the prophets and the Psalms). They were also correct to accept the canon of the New Testament, since these books, like the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, owe their origin to the Holy Spirit breathing them forth. Jesus not only foretold of new revelation, but the apostolic church was fully conscious of God giving new revelation through the writings of men moved to speak by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we accept the canon of Scripture, because these sixty-six books (and these books only) come from God. They alone are given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They alone come to us with the authority of God himself. These books found the church, because they reveal the will of God (the law) and the person and work of the savior (the gospel). God speaks to us in and through his word, and this is enough. In the sixty-six books of the Bible we have all we need for the salvation of both body and soul. For only in these holy books, do we find Jesus Christ, who loved us, and gave himself for us.

¹² Warfield points out that “That the early Christians recognized a difference between true and false teaching is patent in the pages of the New Testament. In the Pastoral Epistles, ‘sound teaching’ (1 Ti 1:10; 6:3; 2 Ti 1:13; 4:3; Tit 1:9; 2:1) rooted in ‘faithful words’ (1 Ti 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Ti 2:11; Tit 1:9; 3:8) stands in contrast to strange teaching (1 Ti 1:3; 6:3) or the ‘opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge’ (1 Ti 6:20) propagated ‘mere talkers and deceivers’ (Tit 1:10). Warnings elsewhere to guard against false teachers, false prophets, or false apostles (Mt 7:15; 24:11, 24; 2 Co 11:13; 2 Pe 2:1; 1 Jn 2:26-27; 4:1-6; 2 Jn 7; Rev 2:2, 20) who corrupt the gospel of Christ (2 Co 11:4; Gal 1:6-9; Php 3:17-19; Jude 4) present a similar pattern.” Cf. Warfield, “The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament,” pp. 411-12.

