

FOR GÜNTHER BORNKAMM ON HIS 70 TH BIRTHDAY

Canon and Theological Variety:
A Study in the Pauline Tradition

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Introduction

One of the continuing tasks of both Old and New Testament scholarship is to illuminate the rich theological variety of the canonical documents in their historical contexts. It is a task that cuts across all confessional lines and seeks to clarify what this variety may imply for the interpretation of canonical writings.

These canonical writings have been a source of diversity and disunity in Christian history; and how they are understood continues to exert a divisive influence. However, in our own generation critical-historical scholarship has come to be a far more uniting than dividing factor. Since the Second Vatican Council this scholarship has contributed to a fresh emphasis on the scriptural canon, as well as to the movement toward Christian unity.

But this does not mean a movement toward theological uniformity. Quite the contrary. Critical-historical scholarship opens more and more the rich theological variety in the canonical writings themselves and points to a varied and dynamic theological interpretation by early Christians in their own particular historical situations.

This is to say that the canon itself demonstrates the ongoing hermeneutical or interpretive task in early Christianity. The normative character of these writings does not lie in their capacity to provide a dogmatic, theological uniformity. It lies rather in their capacity to point the Christian community to the continuing task of interpretation in changing historical contexts and to illuminate the life of that community by providing, as it were, partners-in-dialogue from its earliest periods. The canon reminds the Church that it is a historical community with a particular past, but a past which itself points to the future and to the necessity of ongoing interpretation in new historical settings.

Of course multiple factors entered into the Church's historical affirmation of a scriptural canon, and seeking a rationale for it is part of the continuing interpretive task. But a primary factor would appear to have been a pragmatic one, i. e. the ultimately declared