

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

### VOLUME 1 B. THE SCRIPTURES

## Attachment 2: the extent and certainty of the canon

*This statement was published as 'Attachment 2' to a document entitled 'A Consensus Statement on Holy Scripture', which was prepared by the CTICR. It was submitted to the 1984 General Pastors Conference and General Synod, to subsequent District Pastors Conferences and District Synods, and finally adopted by the General Synod at its 1987 Convention.*

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The extent and limits of the canon are strictly a matter of history, and history has left us, as far as the NT goes, with the situation that certain writings were recognised as canonical throughout the Church from very early days. These, the *homologoumena* (books commonly accepted), were not so much accepted as canonical by church decision as, rather, simply coming to be used and recognised as the need for canonical writings arose. Together with the *homologoumena*, the Church has another group of writings, the *antilogomena* (books spoken against), which did not enjoy general acceptance as canonical in the early centuries but which were separated from other Christian writings at the time by church decisions.

This historical situation is a given; it cannot be undone. The Church in later times is not in a position to make a better decision than that made by the Church which was in time closest to the circumstances surrounding the writings in question.

No theological conclusions can be drawn from a historical datum. A conclusion of practical value for the Church, one approaching a theological conclusion, is that the Church should not formulate doctrines which are supported only or in the main by any of the *antilogomena*. However, the *antilogomena* may be used to support, in one way or another, teachings which are clearly contained elsewhere in the *homologoumena*.

It is quite wrong to draw theological conclusions patterned on the distinction between the *homologoumena* and the *antilogomena*. This is done when theologians try to find a canon within the canon, when they play Paul off against the Gospels, or Jesus against Paul, or when they play Jesus off against the Synoptics by endeavouring to get back to the original Jesus. Such activity is an attack upon the Canon itself, and, at bottom, an attack on the way in which God chose to guide his Church into all truth.

The whole question should not be made one by which the Church is brought into doubt or confusion. For all practical purposes, in the Lutheran Church too, the NT consists of the 27 books regularly found there. That the Early Church generally adopted the *antilegomena* is a strong proof for their authority. At the same time, the right cannot be denied to this or that individual to deny the canonical position of one or the other of the *antilegomena* if his own study and convictions lead him to that conclusion (Luther!). However, such a conclusion is and must remain a private one.

An analogous situation exists in respect of the OT. Here it is the existence of the Greek Canon alongside the Hebrew Canon which causes the uncertainty. Jesus worked in terms of the Hebrew Canon, and so did the apostles in the main. There are very few quotations, for instance, from writings not belonging to the Hebrew Canon in the NT. On the other hand, a large percentage of the quotations from the books of the Hebrew Canon are given in the Greek of the LXX. The ready-made translation probably accounts for this fact; but the fact itself raises the question of the authority of the two texts at least, if not of the two lists of books.

Practically, we must draw a similar conclusion as was drawn earlier. We operate with what has become established custom in the Church, not because it is custom only but because it represents one clear historical position. On the other hand, those who know have the right to use the text at any place which in their judgment is the better one. Again, no doctrine can be drawn from the books of the Greek Canon not found in the Hebrew Canon, however much value there is in the study of these other writings. They can also be used to support thoughts and teachings of the Hebrew Canon.