

Canon and Charisma

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In the thick of claim and counter-claim about 'the gifts' – tongues, prophesying and the apostolate – with all the bad blood they generate, there seems to be room for a new approach to this controversy. Or rather, for the revival of an old approach.

Current debate, at least from the side of those who are most doubtful about the claims that 'the gifts' continue today, centres upon questions of historical continuity. Were 'the gifts' to have continued after the death of the apostles? Did they in fact continue? Can they properly be expected to continue once the canon of the New Testament was formed? Some say 'Yes' to these questions, and some say 'No' and the debate stalemates. But if the answer to these questions is 'Yes' or 'Yes, possibly' the debate then moves from the first century A.D. to today. And the central question becomes: Do the present-day phenomena such as tongue-speaking correspond to what is called tongue-speaking in the New Testament? Here again the answer is sometimes 'Yes' and sometimes 'No', and the debate stalemates again.

In an effort to break this deadlock it is sometimes said, by those who wish to uphold the sole authority of the New Testament – and to claim that 'the gifts' were phenomena of the early church alone – that the New Testament itself teaches as much. It is claimed that passages such as 1 Corinthians 13 teach that the gifts will cease when the New Testament itself is complete, 'when that which is perfect is come.' So if the New Testament teaches that the gifts will cease, and the New Testament has sole authority, then it must be accepted that the gifts will cease. Or rather, that they have ceased.

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This piece of exegesis has seemed to others besides this writer to be a dubious interpretation of the passage. But there is, I venture to suggest, a more important point to be emphasised in the face of the claim that the New Testament teaches that 'the gifts' will cease upon the completion of the canon, a point of logic. Not only does the New Testament not teach this in places such as 1 Corinthians 13, the New Testament, if it is to be regarded as canonical, *could* not teach this.

Let us see why this is. Suppose that there was a list of all the writings which form the New Testament canon tacked on at the end of the book of the Revelation. It reads 'The writings known as the Gospel according to St Matthew ...

In this provocative article Paul Helm invites us to consider an unusual perspective on the issues of New Testament canon and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

the Revelation of St John the Divine, and only these form the New Testament canon' (NIV rendering). This is of course an entirely fanciful suggestion. Not even the most sanguine interpreters of 1 Corinthians 13 suppose that the words 'that which is perfect' are anything more than an oblique reference to the New Testament canon. But fanciful or not, let us call the added list 'L'.

It would be pertinent to ask the following questions about 'L'. Is 'L' itself canonical scripture? If not, then we need have no more interest in it than in any post-apostolic writing, say the writings of Clement of Rome. But what if the answer is 'Yes'?

Here we begin to run into difficulties. If 'L' is part of the New Testament canon then the next question is 'How do we know? How does it come to be part of the canon? How is it recognised as such, given that it does not *claim* to be canonical? But suppose further that 'L' *did* say, by a suitable addition, that it was part of the New Testament canon. Then the list would say that it was part of the canon, but only at the expense of *adding* to the canon as we now know it. What this shows – the point of logic mentioned earlier – is that there is no way in which we can be told explicitly what the canonical writings are except by a process which involves an increase in the canon. But then who's to say that we ought to accept the addition as canonical? Is there any reason to do so? How do we recognise the proposed addition to the canon as itself canonical? Clearly the fact that the list says that it is canonical will hardly do.

It follows that anything which describes and endorses the canon of the New Testament cannot itself have canonical status. If we suppose it *has* that status then we would need another addition to endorse *it*, and so on *ad infinitum*. This is a logical point about laws or rules or standards. There is no law which tells us what all the laws of England are, no rule of boxing which tells us what all the rules of boxing are, and so on. So even if the currently-proffered interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13 were plausible it would fall far short of the intended goal, and inevitably so. For it is no part of the meaning of these texts that they list the canonical writings. Nor, if the argument given above is

correct, *could* they do so and still remain canonical. For no statement of the form 'S is the final authority' is itself finally authoritative. (When Reformed theologians refer to the 'self-authenticating' character of Scripture then whatever else they mean by that phrase they mean to recognise this point of logic).

But should the conclusion of this line of argument, that it is impossible for the canonical writings to contain a definitive list of the canonical writings, cause alarm and despondency? Does it put paid to the idea of the canon of the New Testament and thus put paid to its authority in the church? Not at all. It simply points to the logical impossibility of establishing the canon in one particular way.

But there are other ways. Let us call the attempt to establish the canon by providing a list of the canonical books, the attempt that we have seen is unsuccessful, the *formal* way of establishing canonicity, formal because its procedures make no reference to the actual content or teaching of the books in question but attempt to establish canonicity by listing names of documents.

The canon is not the creation of the Church but, is recognised by her as such

In contrast to this is the attempt to establish canonicity by reference to the *content* of the documents, to what they say. On this approach those writings are, and are to be, regarded as canonical which contain apostolic teaching, which have, in Gerald Bray's words, 'intrinsic value as apostolic documents'. Canonicity is to be ascribed to those writings which provide the teaching of the apostles themselves and which were written either by the apostles or by those under their direct influence.

Although such an approach to canonicity is doubtless consistent with Christ's own teaching regarding the apostles, and their own understanding of their position, what writings do and do not form the canon is, in the last resort, a matter of extra-canonical *judgement*. For if the judgement itself were granted canonical status it could no longer be a judgement about the canon, but an extension of it.

So questions of canonicity or apostolicity are to be answered in terms of *content*, which is for us partly a matter of the historical provenance of the documents and partly a matter of the nature of the teaching they contain. Is such a proposal for establishing canonicity novel? Certainly not. It has an illustrious pedigree which goes back to the debates about Scriptural authority at the time of the Reformation and, perhaps more important, it represents one important view as to how, as a matter of historical fact, the canon came to be recognised as such.

At the time of the Reformation the question was, Does the Church authenticate and create the canon, or does the canon

authenticate and create the church? The uniform answer of the Reformers - an answer which made them into *Reformers* - was: the canon authenticates the church. The canon is not the creation of the church, but is recognised by her as such. And that is the true church whose message has the true (apostolic, Biblical) content. So the claim to exist in historical succession to the apostles, however poorly or well validated, it may be, is of no value if the message of such a church is unapostolic in content.

This then, is the *content* test of canonicity and authority. Such an approach, when applied to currently-agitated questions about 'the gifts', is of considerable importance. For the questions which preoccupy so many at the present time - are 'the gifts' the same kind as were present at Corinth? Are they meant to continue today? - are questions which, if answering them is meant to settle the question of whether they are authentically Christian phenomena, are essentially based upon Roman Catholic theological assumptions. For the questions assume that what settles the matter of authenticity is *historical continuity or recurrence* when what matters at a time so long after the last apostle) is not historical continuity but apostolic character and content.

Let us try to develop the 'content' test of authenticity a little further, at least to the extent of seeing what further questions ought to be formulated by it, leaving the answers to these questions to arise out of the actual investigation of the phenomena.

If, broadly speaking, there are three phenomena which require investigation - the alleged continuity of the apostolate, prophecy and tongues - then we can see that the first of these is dealt with by straightforward New Testament exegesis of what an apostle was, in precisely the way in which any other New Testament doctrine is established. But what about prophecy and tongues? How can a content-approach to these phenomena be developed?

It is here that we may get help from an old hand at such matters, Jonathan Edwards. Throughout the period of the Great Awakening Edwards was perplexed by 'the phenomena' that occurred in the revivals - claims to inspiration, sudden 'leadings', bodily contortions, great fluency in religious talk, and so on - and particularly about their relationship to true Christian conversion and discipleship. Some people involved in the Awakening claimed that such happenings, one or more of them, were *necessary* for a person to be a genuine Christian. Others claimed that they were *necessary* and *sufficient*. Rolling around on the floor during the service *proved*, they said, that you were truly converted, that you had been 'taken over' by the Holy Spirit. Others, in sharp contrast, said that if you had such experiences you were *necessarily not* a Christian. How could anyone who was a true Christian roll around the floor during the service?

Edwards' approach to this controversy is interesting. In *The Religious Affections*, the culmination of his numerous writings on the nature of revival, he rejected all such lines of argument. He rejected them because they all have a purely

formal character. They were unconvincing because they were detached from the doctrinal content of Christianity and from the character of true Christian experience and practice. It is worth glancing at Edwards' procedure in a little more detail.

Having (in Part I of the *Affections*) stressed the importance of affection (or emotion) in religion, in Part II Edwards sets out to show 'what are no certain signs that religious affections are truly gracious, or that they are not'. There is, Edwards says, a class of phenomena which is neutral or indifferent as regards the evidence they give for the presence of saving grace. A person may experience such phenomena, and be converted. But he may also have them and not be converted. Among the signs which Edwards lists are: heightened feelings, bodily effects, fluency about religion, immediate and unsought experiences accompanied by texts of Scripture coming to the mind, conduct having the appearance of love, having a number of religious feelings together and in a certain order, and being zealous in attending worship.

In terms of the contrast we drew earlier all these happenings are purely *formal* in character. They refer to certain manners or modes of behaviour and are doctrinally and ethically neutral. They are therefore to be regarded in the same way as matters which are ethically indifferent; they are neither required nor forbidden.

No one can, consistently with New Testament teaching, insist upon Christian experience taking a particular form

Then what for Edwards *are* 'distinguishing signs of truly gracious and holy affections'? These have, Edwards says, a 'spiritual, supernatural and divine origin'. What does he mean? He means that such emotions have come about in a certain way. Furthermore, they have as their object, ground or reason the divine excellency for its own sake, especially God's moral character. '*Holy persons*, in the exercise of *holy affections*, love divine things primarily for their *holiness*.' So the relevant question is not, 'Do texts of Scripture come suddenly and unaccountably to mind?' But, 'Does Scripture, however it comes into the mind, instruct the mind? Do people understand it, believe it and respond appropriately to it? There might be a 'mighty uproar in both soul and body'. But, once again, the question is, are people thereby instructed, enlightened and engaged in the service of God, or (as seems more likely) distracted and deranged? There is about true Christian experience a conviction of the reality and certainty of divine things, accompanied by 'evangelical humiliation'. Christian virtue is promoted - love, meekness, quietness - and Christian practice results, this being the chief sign to ourselves and to

others that we are genuinely Christian.

The principle which Edwards is insisting upon should be made clear. He is not saying that if bodily contortions are found to be accompanied by certain biblically-warranted spiritual and ethical effects then this shows the genuineness or importance of the contortions. Rather, he is saying that since certain phenomena may be found to be accompanied by genuine religion in one case and by false religion in another then the phenomena as such are of no intrinsic spiritual or religious value.

So the question is not, 'It is all too easy to focus upon the publicly observable phenomena and to argue endlessly - because the matter is unsetttable - about their character and genuineness. It is highly likely that none of us has the data to answer such questions, partly because no one is sure what the New Testament phenomena were like and partly because the current goings-on are so diverse, and so many different and incompatible things are claimed for them. To follow up such matters only leads into a morass of unsetttable questions. It is no wonder if the debate generates more heat than light.

If, by contrast, questions of theological and spiritual *content* are emphasised the debate is brought back into the centre of the gospel and certain questions are addressed which are *setttable*. The phenomena, as phenomena, are shunted to one side. The debate is then open to be conducted in ways in which no questions are begged ('Tongue speaking is a sign of the re-birth of apostolicity, therefore ' *versus* 'Current phenomena are spurious and unbiblical, therefore'). The central questions become those questions which are central in the New Testament, questions about doctrine, how it is properly received, and how it bears fruit in spirituality and conduct. Edwards reminds us that whatever we may make of 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 there is no denying Paul's meaning in the rest of the chapter.

There is one further practical matter which is worth touching upon. If, following Edwards, we insist that *content* is paramount and *form* of no importance in evaluating Christian experience, then it is a corollary of this that no one can, consistently with the New Testament teaching, insist upon Christian experience taking a particular form. Because the New Testament makes no such requirement. If this is so, then one thing that could hold up a rapprochement between 'charismatics' and 'non-charismatics' is the failure of one or both sides to recognise this fact. Those who insist upon the need for a particular *form* - say, tongue-speaking - are insisting on what is, from the point of view of the New Testament, indifferent. Those who insist on the repudiation of tongues are in the same position. This appears to be what is happening at present. Only time will tell if it will continue.