

One of the cardinal principles of the Reformation was the right and duty of every believer to interpret the Scripture for himself up to the limit of his knowledge. Our doctrine is not determined according to human ideas and philosophies. It is not the result of human speculation, or of human aesthetic feeling. Our convictions about God and His will must be determined by careful objective study of His Word.

This right and duty of private judgment on the interpretation of Scripture has always been claimed by evangelical Protestants. Inevitably, however, another question arises. How do we know what is the Word of God? We have many evidences of the marvelous uniqueness of the Scripture. The Holy Spirit testifies to our souls that this book is indeed God's Word. If we have been born again through the Holy Spirit, we know that Jesus Christ is our Saviour and Lord, and we are anxious to accept those books which He approves. Yet this does not immediately determine the question as to selection of the individual books. After all, the Bible was not written by one man, nor at one time. Its books were written by many different men over a period of many centuries. These men varied greatly in their characteristics. Some were kings upon the throne, while others were shepherds caring for the sheep. Some were prophets and some were priests. They discussed a great variety of subjects, and used many types of literary style. These various books are now combined together into one volume which we call the Bible, but until our present book form came into general use, at some time between the second and fourth centuries A.D., such a unified volume was not known. Before that time the various books existed on separate scrolls. How are we to know whether the men who combined these books into our present Bible made a correct selection of the books to include?

Roman Catholics assert that the Bible is the production of their church and that its hierarchy has the right to determine which books should be accepted as being inspired of God. Protestants have reacted strongly against this position. They assert that there is no evidence in Scripture or elsewhere that the Lord Jesus Christ established a continuing group of officials with authority to determine religious matters for Christian believers. They insist that each individual Christian must determine his own attitude on religious matters by study of the Word of God. This position being taken, we are immediately faced with the question, how is the individual to know which books are to be accepted as part of God's inspired Word? Must the individual believer study the evidence regarding the genuineness of each book for himself and make a decision as to every book which claims to be divine Scripture? Or is there some way in which he can have more certainty on this point?

Sometimes it is said that "apostolicity determines canonicity." According to this view, each believer must determine for himself which books were written in Old Testament times by prophets, and accept these books as parts of the Old Testament, and each believer must determine for himself which books were written in New Testament times by apostles or under apostolic direction, and accept such books as parts of the New Testament. According to this view, then, the believer has the duty of personal judgment in this matter also, and must base his judgment upon a historical question. If he can find satisfactory evidence for the determining of this question, he can solve the problem.

Unfortunately, however, such evidence is not always available. There is great difficulty in determining with certainty the authorship of many of the books. Even when the authorship is fairly certain, it is sometimes extremely difficult to find evidence on which to determine whether the author was actually a prophet or an apostle.