

## AT A GLANCE

**Box 1.6 The New Testament Canon**

1. Early Christianity was not the unified monolith that modern people sometimes assume. It was, in fact, extremely diverse.
2. This diversity was manifest in a wide range of writings, only some of which have come down to us in the New Testament.
3. The New Testament canon was formed by proto-orthodox Christians who wanted to show that their views were grounded in the writings of Jesus' own apostles.
4. Whether these writings actually represented the views of Jesus' own apostles, however, was in some instances debated for decades, even centuries.
5. A historical approach to these writings allows each book to speak for itself, without assuming they are all saying the same thing.
6. This approach will allow us to see the diversity of early Christianity more clearly, already in its earliest writings.

**Excursus: Some Additional Reflections: The Historian and the Believer**

Most of the people interested in the New Testament, at least in modern American culture, are Christians who have been taught that it is the inspired word of God. If you yourself belong to this camp, then you may find the historical perspective that I have mapped out in this chapter somewhat difficult to accept, in that it may seem to stand at odds with what you have been taught to believe. If so, then it is for you in particular that I want to provide these brief additional reflections.

Here is the question: how can a Christian who is committed to the Bible affirm that its authors have a wide range of perspectives, and that they sometimes disagree with one another? I can address the question by stressing that this book is a historical introduction to the early Christian writings, principally those found in the New Testament, rather than a confessional one. This is an important distinction because the

New Testament has always been much more than a book for Christian believers. It is also an important cultural artifact, a collection of writings that stands at the foundation of much of our Western civilization and heritage. These books came into existence at a distant point in time and have been transmitted through the ages until today. In other words, in addition to being documents of faith, these books are rooted in history; they were written in particular historical contexts and have always been read within particular historical contexts. For this reason, they can be studied not only by believers for their theological significance but also by historians (whether or not they happen to be believers) for their historical significance.

Historians deal with past events that are matters of the public record. The public record consists of human actions and world events—things that anyone can see or experience. Historians try to reconstruct what probably happened in the past on the basis of data that can be examined and evaluated by every interested observer of every persuasion. Access to these data does

not depend on presuppositions or beliefs about God. This means that historians, as historians, have no privileged access to what happens in the supernatural realm; they have access only to what happens in this, our natural world. The historian's conclusions should, in theory, be accessible and acceptable to everyone, whether the person is a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, an atheist, a pagan, or anything else.

To illustrate the point: historians can tell you the similarities and differences between the worldviews of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you that Gandhi's belief in God was wrong or that Martin Luther King's was right. This judgment is not part of the public record and depends on theological assumptions and personal beliefs that are not shared by everyone conducting the investigation. Historians can describe to you what happened during the conflicts between Catholics and Lutherans in sixteenth-century Germany; they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you which side God was on. Likewise, historians can explain what probably happened at Jesus' crucifixion, but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you that he was crucified for the sins of the world.

Does that mean that historians cannot be believers? No, it means that if historians tell you that Martin Luther King Jr. had a better theology than Gandhi, or that God was on the side of the Protestants instead of the Catholics, or that Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world, they are telling you this not in their capacity as historians but in their capacity as believers. Believers are interested in knowing about God, about how to behave, about what to believe, about the ultimate meaning of life. The historical disciplines cannot supply them with this kind of information. Historians who work within the

constraints of this discipline are limited to describing, to the best of their abilities, what probably happened in the past (as discussed further in Chapter 14).

Many such historians, including a large number of those mentioned in the bibliographies scattered throughout this book, find historical research to be completely compatible with—even crucial for—traditional theological beliefs; others find it to be incompatible. This is an issue that you yourself may want to deal with, as you grapple intelligently with how the historical approach to the New Testament affects positively, negatively, or not at all your faith commitments. I should be clear at the outset, though, that as the author of this book, I will neither tell you how to resolve this issue nor urge you to adopt any particular set of theological convictions. My approach instead will be strictly historical, trying to understand the writings of the early Christians from the standpoint of the professional historian who uses whatever evidence happens to survive in order to reconstruct what happened in the past.

That is to say, I am not going to convince you either to believe or to disbelieve the Gospel of John; I will describe how it probably came into existence and discuss what its message was. I am not going to persuade you that Jesus really was or was not the Son of God; I will try to establish what he said and did based on the historical data that are available. I am not going to discuss whether the Bible is or is not the inspired word of God; I will show how we got this collection of books and indicate what they say and reflect on how scholars have interpreted them. This kind of information may well be of some use to the reader who happens to be a believer, but it will certainly be useful to one—believer or not—who is interested in history, especially the history of early Christianity and its literature.