A Light in the Darkness

THE DOCTRINE OF THE WORD OF GOD

Recap…

- Historical-Critical Model
  - The canon is the collection of writings early Christians decided would be in the canon for various reasons
  - Exclusive Model (Sundberg's fixed and final "list")
    - The canon is the collection of writings that made the fixed, final list.
- Canonical Criticism The canon is the collections of writings that function as the normative, authoritative texts for the Christian community, regardless of whether it is "open" or "closed."
- Roman Catholic Model (the Church infallibly determined the canon)
  - The canon is the collection of writings the Catholic Church infallibly determined were authoritative

'Canon' as Concept | Criteria of Canonicity Model (B.B. Warfield, A.A. Hodge, R.C. Sproul)

- On this model, 'canon' may be understood ontologically, functionally or both, but the common thread is that we hold to our 27-book NT because each book (and only those books) meets the proper historical/theological criterion.
  - Apostolicity
    - Was this written by an apostle or under his supervision?
  - Antiquity
    - Was this written early or much later in the second century?
  - Orthodoxy
    - Is the content theologically consistent?
  - Inerrancy
    - Are there any errors of any kind?
  - Widespread Use and Acceptance (Corporate Reception)
    - Was this accepted widely and used normatively by the early Christian community in public reading/worship?

'Canon' as Concept | Criteria of Canonicity Model (B.B. Warfield, A.A. Hodge, R.C. Sproul)

- Warfield: "It is a most assured result of biblical criticism that every one of the 27 books which now constitute our New Testament is assuredly genuine and authentic."

- It's important to realize that many supporters of the criteria of canonicity model also are either sympathetic to or explicitly endorse the self-authenticating model (below) but are not content to let it stand by itself as an apologetic strategy.

- Challenges for the Criteria of Canonicity Model
  - Who determined the "criteria" for canonicity? How did they do so, and what if they got it wrong?
  - Does holding the NT documents up to external standards imply that there is something more authoritative than Scripture?
    - Kruger: "To authenticate the canon on the basis of a supposedly independent, neutral standard ultimately subjects the canon to an authority outside itself. It allows autonomous human assessment of the historical evidence to become an external authority over God's word."

'Canon' as Concept | Self-Authentication Model (Calvin, Turretin, Bavinck, Frame, Kruger)

- On this view, nothing outside of Scripture is necessary to verify which ancient writings were/are canonical because they testify to their own inspiration through the beauty, harmony, profundity and majesty of the text combined with the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.

- John Calvin: "Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste."
  - Much like someone with perfect pitch can hear a "C" and simply know it is a "C" without argument or proof, so God's sheep hear his voice (Jn. 10:27).

'Canon' as Concept | Self-Authentication Model (Calvin, Turretin, Bavinck, Frame, Kruger)

- Divine Qualities
  - Beauty and Excellency
  - Power and Efficacy
    - Wright: "Those who read these writings discovered, from very early on, that the books themselves carried the same power, the same *authority in action*, that had characterized the initial preaching of the 'word.'"
  - Unity and Harmony
    - The Old and New Testaments both form a mutually complementing, coherent whole and tell one tightly-woven story of redemption with major themes and patterns running throughout.

'Canon' as Concept | Self-Authentication Model (Calvin, Turretin, Bavinck, Frame, Kruger)

- Challenges for the Self-Authentication View
  - It isn't clear to many Christians that all parts of Scripture self-authenticate and sing the divine "high C."
  - One wonders if the self-authentication view is motivated by trying to avoid the Catholic "table of contents" line of reasoning.
  - Practically, it has little apologetic value. "Trust me, I hear God in this document," isn't bound to be very persuasive to a non-Christian or a Christian with doubts.
  - One might wonder if the "divine qualities" were reverse engineered to confirm the canon after the canon was already assembled instead of used to actually identify it, particularly the OT canon (e.g., "Now that we have decided the canon, what divine qualities can we identify in it that verify it?")

Analysis...

– Historical-Criticism: recognizes a strong human element in canonization

– Sundberg: recognizes the importance of stated agreement in list form

– Canonical-Criticism: recognizes the importance of theology in canon formation and shows the importance of canon as authoritative functioning before an official list

– Roman Catholic: emphasizes the importance of articulating how one is confident in the canonical books and that the canon is the church's book

– Criteria of Canonicity: shows the importance of non-arbitrary, thoughtful reasons for the acceptance of the canonical books

– Self-Authentication Model: recognizes the Scriptures as writings unique to all of history and identifiable as such by their divine qualities—they bear their Author's signature.

A Few Distinctions…

- Ontology: the study of existence and the nature of things
  - E.g., "The Scriptures *are authoritative* because God is their author."
- Epistemology: the study of how we come to have knowledge of things
  - E.g., "I believe the Scriptures are authoritative because my Sunday School teacher told me so."
- Knowing vs. Showing
  - Much canonical discussion among believers confuses how one *knows* the canon, from how someone *shows* or *demonstrates* the canon. They aren't the same thing (e.g., Plantinga's thought-experiment).
    - I *know* I had a bad dream last night because of my direct witness/experience, but that doesn't furnish me with anything to *demonstrate* I had such a dream.

A Threefold Understanding of 'Canon'

- Canonization' should be understood as less of a dot and more of a line, following the historical flow of authorship under God's sovereignty.
  - **Canon** (ontological): the inspired Scriptures. This 'canon' existed as soon as Revelation was written.
  - **Canon** (functional): the core apostolic writings that functioned as authoritative for the Christian community, even if the "edges" were fuzzy. This 'canon' existed by the mid-second century or before.
  - **Canon** (epistemological): the writings that eventually gained consensus recognition and approval from the church. This 'canon' existed by the end of the fourth century.
- What's important in answering "when the canon was decided" is understanding which definition someone is using.

Proposal: A Supplemented, Self-Authenticating Model

– While the Bible certainly bears divine marks of its authorship, not all parts were/are *equally recognizable* as such to the Christian community. Thus, while playing a crucial role, self-authentication did not play a *complete* role—there were other factors that also played critical roles in helping the early church clearly *identify* the inspired Scriptures (both then and now).

• Those attributes were primarily: apostolicity, antiquity, corporate reception/use and orthodoxy/inerrancy.

– To include reasons outside of the Scripture's own self-attestation as a basis for belief in the canon does nothing to undercut the sovereignty of the Spirit, who was at work in guiding the church to identify those attributes, *all of which are mentioned or implied in Scripture itself.*

Which Books and When?

- The existence of diversity within the early church has caused some to conclude that there was no "real," consensus and that our current canon is the result of the "winners" writing the history books, so to speak. But is recognizing inspired writing immune to disagreement? Should we have expected unanimous consensus. It seems not.
  - The Scriptures themselves warn of false teaching and teachers claiming authority in the church (2 Pet. 2:2; 1 Jn. 2:19).
  - We cannot deny the reality of spiritual forces opposing the church, increasing dissension.
  - Sin causes people to resist the Spirit and the words of Jesus
  - Not all groups or authors who claimed to be "the church" or even "Christians" were really part of it. Thus, it's not entirely surprising what they considered to be Scripture might differ.
  - The Scriptures were written at various times and places and therefore were not circulated across the empire simultaneously; thus, some books would have been known and accepted in one part of the empire before others.

Which Books and When Cont…

- As early as the dawn of the second century, we have authors mentioning "the epistle of the blessed Apostle, Paul" (1 Clement), the "decrees" and "ordinances" of the apostles (Ignatius), calling certain New Testament verses "Scripture" (Polycarp, Eph. 4:26), validation of Mark's Gospel as authoritative (Papias), the "memoirs of the Apostles (Justin Martyr) and copious quotations of the New Testament, particularly the Gospels and Epistles of Paul.
  - The apostolic fathers employed the New Testament writings more than the Old Testament writings, from five to fifty times more often! Additionally, "Citations of apocryphal gospels and of other books that were later excluded from the canon *do not begin to compete* with the frequency of citation of the basic core."

- John Barton: "[It would be] mistaken to say that [by the early second century] 'there was no Christian Scripture other than the Old Testament,' for much of the core already had as high a status as it would ever have.

Which Books and When Cont...

- Irenaeus (c. 170-180)
  - Irenaeus's influence on canonical recognition was quite significant. He quoted the New Testament more than the Old Testament (more than 1000x) and regarded it as Scripture. This included all four Gospels, all of Paul's letter (minus Philemon), Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John and Revelation and *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

- The Muratorian Fragment (c. 180)
  - This is our earliest and first canonical "list." It explicitly affirms 22 of our 27 NT books (all four Gospels, Acts, 13 of Paul's epistles, 1 and 2 John, Jude, Revelation.

- Clement (c. 150-215)
  - Clement moved to Alexandria in the late second century to educate Christians and convert pagans. He knew and used 23 of the 27 books of the NT. The only books not mentioned in his writings are Philemon, James, 2 Peter and 3 John, and it isn't clear he knew of them.