A Light in the Darkness

THE DOCTRINE OF THE WORD OF GOD

What Do We Mean When We Say 'Canon'?

- 'Canon' comes from the Greek *kanon*, which is a term derived from the Hebrew *qaneh*, meaning "reed" or "measuring rod." Fundamentally, it refers to a reed or rod for measuring things. Eventually, 'canon' began to refer to a standard of some sort or a criterion to see if a particular thing met a certain standard.

  – The challenge for canonical studies is not etymological—everyone agrees on the meaning/origin of the word. Rather, the challenge is conceptual: what do we mean when we employ the concept of a measuring?

'Canon' as Concept | Community and Historically Determined

- Fundamentally, historical-critical models, despite significant variants, all hold that the canon is fundamentally a human construct that can be/should be accounted for by historical, natural reasons.
  - "The decision[s] to collect a group of chosen books and form a 'Scripture,' are all human decisions." – James Barr
  - "Canonical status is not an intrinsic quality of a text, but a status bestowed upon it by a community of interpreters." – Hugo Lundhaug

'Canon' as Concept | Community and Historically Determined Cont...

- Challenges for the Historical-Critical Model
  - Does the fact that the early church and Christian community played a significant role in recognizing/establishing the canon in some sense mean that they played the *only* role?
  - Does such a model presuppose naturalism and/or the falsehood of Christianity? If not, what justification is there for thinking the canon is *only* a human product if the potential "candidate" texts claim for themselves divine inspiration?

'Canon' as Concept | The Exclusive Model (Albert Sundberg)

- 'Scripture' vs. 'Canon'
  - 'Canon' refers to a fixed, final, closed list of authoritative books.
  - There may have been writings that were considered Scripture and influential in the Christian community, but not canonical (i.e., they didn't make the final list). Thus, the exclusive model is closely (but not necessarily) tied to historical-critical models and/or their fruit.
- Challenges for the Exclusive Model
  - Was such a sharp Scripture-canon distinction conceptually likely to be drawn by early Christians? If they were able to identify certain writings as Scripture and others not, isn't that materially the same thing as saying which books are 'in' or 'out' (i.e., canonical)?

'Canon' as Concept | The Exclusive Model (Albert Sundberg)

- What counts as a 'final', 'fixed', 'authoritative' list? If unanimity is required, there still wasn't a canon in the fourth century—or even today.
  - If it refers to an official 'act' of the early church, the Council of Trent in the 16th century is the earliest, clear candidate.
- Practically, does such a distinction create the inaccurate impression that there were no authoritative writings governing Christianity until the mid-fourth century?
  - Dempster: "Reserving the terminology 'canon' for only the final collection of books obscures the continuity that exists at earlier times. To accept such a limiting definition might suggest that the canon did not have a history, only to be created *ex nihilo*, the result of a [church] council."

'Canon' as Concept | Roman Catholic Model

- On this view, the Church [Roman Catholic] infallibly and authoritatively establishes/has established the canonical books. Catholic teaching and authors differ, however, on exactly what they mean by "establish."
  - "The Scriptures have only as much force as the fables of Aesop, if destitute of the authority of the church." - Stanislaus Hosius
  - "Catholic Theology…has solved the canon problem with a plea to the authority of the Church." – H.J. Adriaanse
  - "No Catholic would want to say that the authority of the Bible derives simply from the decree of a council. Trent recognized the Bible; it did not create it. The Bible is in the Church, but not from the church."

'Canon' as Concept | Roman Catholic Model

- Challenges for the Roman Catholic Model
  - The model stands or falls with ones understanding of the authority of the Church related to the sufficiency of Scripture and thus, is difficult to evaluate independently.
  - The apostolic teaching, which would later become the New Testament, was available orally from the beginning. Given the church is built on the apostles (Eph. 2:20), why would there be no acknowledged, authoritative teaching until hundreds of years later?
  - The early church *did* have a canon of sorts—the Old Testament. How did the Old Testament achieve solid, authoritative status in the absence of a church Council?

'Canon' as Concept | Roman Catholic Model

- – Ultimately, the Roman Catholic model confuses *historical order* (church then canon) with *theological order* (canon then church).
  - N.T. Wright: "This makes the rather obvious logical mistake analogous to that of a soldier who, receiving orders through the mail, concludes that the letter carrier is his commanding officer. Those who transmit, collect and distribute the message are not in the same league as those who write it in the first place."

'Canon' as Concept | Canonical-Criticism Model (Brevard Childs, James Sanders)

- This paved the way for a *functional* understanding of 'canon.' Instead of merely denoting a list, 'canon' can refer to a collection of books that constitutes and functions as a religious norm for a community (regardless of whether it is open or closed).
  - "Canon as *function* antedates *canon* as shape." - James Sanders
- Challenges for the Canonical-Criticism Model
  - Did the early church view itself as having the kind of apostolic authority to determine or form the Scriptures instead of preserving them?

'Canon' as Concept | Canonical-Criticism Model (Brevard Childs, James Sanders)

- Does this model run into similar and/or identical objections to the Catholic model in that at the end of the day, the church actually *determines* the canon instead of merely recognizing it, placing the authority of the Church over the Bible?

'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?")