

Theology of New Testament Canon (Lesson 1)

Based on

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The Origin and Authority of the New Testament Canon, Lecturing Professor and Professor of Record: Dr. Michael J. Kruger - <https://subsplash.com/reformtheosem/media/ms/+xjduvb5>

Introduction

The problem with canon – How can we, as Christians, know that we have the right twenty-seven books in our NT? (p15)

Our approach is not to prove the NT as true, but rather to show that we, as Christians, have a basis for believing we have the right books.

Worldview – Christian=Theology

We will examine methodologies about how we got our canon and not the conclusion itself (Catholic vs Protestant).

The Church's Book – Canon as Community Determined

V. Conclusion

This chapter has been devoted to a variety of canonical models that see canon as community determined: historical-critical, Roman Catholic, canonical criticism, and existential/neoorthodox. Though they vary to one degree or another, they all authenticate the canon by appealing to its reception by the Christian community (either corporately or individually). Although these models rightly recognize the importance of community reception as an aspect of canon, they have absolutized this aspect so that it becomes the defining characteristic of canon. This has created an imbalanced approach to canon that is problematic not so much for what it affirms, but for what it leaves out. Largely overlooked in the above models are (1) the intrinsic authority and internal attributes of these books that makes them authoritative and (2) the historical origins of these books and the fact that they stem from the apostolic age and accurately capture the redemptive activities of God in Jesus Christ. As a result of these omissions, these models are left with a canon that is derived from and established by the church, and thus is unable to rule over the church. In effect, the canon has so much become the church's book that it is unable to be God's book.

As a general description, community-determined approaches view canon as something that is, in some sense, established or constituted by the people – either individually or corporately – who have received these books as scripture.

Views (p30)

- Historical-Critical Model – Historic accident
- Roman Catholic Model - Inspired declarations of the church
- Existential/Neorthodox Model – an “event” that takes place when the Spirit works through these books and impacts individuals.
- Commonality – how one knows which books are canonical, they all find the answer in the response of the Cristian community.

Historical-Critical Model

There is no canon until the church acts. It is purely determined by man without any divine intervention.

Sundberg defines canon as a final, fixed, closed list. His definition is so focused on the final stage of the canon’s development that it misses the fact that it is after all, a stage – and therefore is intimately connected to, and dependent on, what has come before.

Roman Catholic Model

At the core of the Roman Catholic view of canon is Rome’s view of the authority of Scripture.

Trifold authority structure:

- Scripture
- Tradition
- Magisterium (the church’s teaching authority)

The Roman Catholic Model argues that we have a canon, because of the church. The church is the cause of the canon. We have infallible scriptures, because we have an infallible church.

Concerns:

1. The foundation of the church is apostolic teachings, along with the prophets, rather than the other way around (Eph 2:20)
2. The OT existed before the church, and was the canon of the early church before the NT.
3. From the earliest day believers received Paul’s letters as scripture (1 Thess. 2:13), Paul clearly intended them to be received as Scripture (Gal. 1:1-24), and even other writers thought they were Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16).
4. Council of Trent 1546, the Catholic Church made a formal and official declaration on the canon of the Bible, particularly the Apocrypha.

Canonical-Criticism Model

Brevard Childs's canonical-criticism model determines which book should be included in the canon. It consists of the books (and the shape of those books) finally settled upon and received by the early church as the basis for their understanding of the gospel.

Functional definition of the term canon is an alternative to Sundberg's. Instead of merely denoting a closed list, Childs and others have suggested that the term can refer to a collection of books that constitute a religious norm for a community (regardless of whether the collection is "open" or "closed").

The canon is "authoritative" not because it is historically true or derived from the apostles; it becomes authoritative when a particular community embraces it in faith. Therefore, canon exists not when there is a final, closed list, but when books function as authoritative Scripture for the community.

We define canon based on three aspects: canon as reception (exclusive), canon as use (functional), and canon as divinely given (ontological).

Existential/Neorthodox Model

Whereas the other model authenticates canon through collective corporate means, this one tends toward a more individualistic and experiential approach. Through individual engagement, authority exists when (and only when) an individual experiences God's word and responds to it in faith.

Karl Barth – the scriptures are not the word of God in a static sense, but "become" the word of God when an existential experience occurs. Although, Barth is committed to the 66 books of the Bible, this thought leaves an open door.

Emil Brunner – argues the borders of the canon are not fixed. Each generation's experience determines what the canon is and makes the canon of scripture have "fluid edges" which will change generation to generation.

Thus,

1. The canon is reduced to a human-determined document that bears no real authority in and of itself.
2. Since canon is community-determined, then community begins to take on authority equal to (if not greater than) that of scripture.
3. If this model is correct then the very concept of canon is in jeopardy.