Theology of New Testament Canon (Lesson 2)

Tracing the Origins – Canon as Historically Determined

These two models put a premium on the historical origins of a book (or its component parts). If a book can be shown to contain authentic Jesus tradition or can be shown to be apostolic, then it is considered part of the genuine canon of Scripture. Specific example of the historically determined models reach very different conclusions, ranging from a rejection of most of the 27 books (canon-within-the-canon model) to an acceptance of all the 27 books (criteria-of-canonicity model).

> **III. Conclusion**
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> This chapter has been devoted to models that view canon as historically determined: canon-within-the-canon and criteria-of-canonicity. Though these models can, at times, differ greatly with one another, they authenticate canon in a similar manner, namely, by engaging in a rigorous historical investigation of these books to see if they are authentic. Although they rightly recognize the importance of the historical dimension—canonical books are fundamentally connected to history—they so absolutize this dimension that other important areas are often minimized or ignored. Most notably, these models tend to downplay the intrinsic characteristics of these books and the ecclesiastical reception of these books as factors in their authentication as canon. As a result, these models are often left with a canon that is so conditioned by historical investigations that its very dignity and authority are inevitably dependent upon these investigations. The canon ceases to be a norm that *guides* our historical investigations, but becomes merely the *product* of our historical investigations.

Canon-within-the-Canon Model

This model reduces the New Testament to its core truths and selecting the parts that will bring "unity to the faith." Like the historical-critical model it often shares the critical methodologies and views the New Testament collection as a largely human construct. The difference is how they respond. Historical-critical model starts with community and moves forward, and the canon-within-the-canon model seeks to peel back the layers and find the real Jesus. However, with canon-within-the-canon model philosophical and theological concerns get mixed in. this often involves the historian's own beliefs about what Jesus should be like or what message he should have preached.

- Feminist scholars – use portions that promote their agenda.
- Liberation theologians – a focus on teaching consistent with relieving the suffering of the oppressed.
- A more orthodox version – use the gospel message itself as a determining factor.

The term canon is used to identify the inner core of the New Testament (as they view it). To them it does matter whether the NT contains genuine teachings and activities of Jesus, and thus our historical investigations play a role in their canonical status.

Problems

Whatever approach used subjects the Scripture to a standard outside of itself, namely, whatever criteria scholars set up to evaluate its truthfulness. If the church gets to edit what seems reasonable or credible

to us will leave us with nothing but a human book. It cannot function as a norm over the church if the church gets to decide which portions of the canon it will accept or reject. Ultimately humans are their own canon they become the standard for truth. Once we allow external criteria to determine the extent of the canon, then the biblical canon, at least in any authoritative sense, ceases to exist.

Criteria-of-Canonicity Model

This model uses criteria (apostolicity, orthodoxy, usage, etc.) and argues the authority of the canon can be established through rigorous historical investigation. The idea is that external data are required to validate the Scriptures as the Word of God. This model overlaps, at points, with other models, that we have looked at. Here however, the dominate criteria is apostolicity.

The more common definitions in this models are the functional (canon as the books used as scriptural authority) and ontological (canon as the books given by God) definitions.

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Evaluation

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1. **"Neutral" Historical Investigations.**

   The belief that historical investigations should be conducted according to neutral standards that are accessible (and agreeable) to the Christian and non-Christian alike.

   Are scholars really able to check their worldviews at the door so easily?

   Modern historical methodologies are largely founded upon non-Christian and enlightenment assumption.

   There is no religiously neutral approach to anything. Roy Clouser demonstrates that the bible's own epistemological position is that, "there is no knowledge or truth that is neutral with respect to God (Luke 11:52, 1 Cor. 1:5, Colossians 2:3, Ps 36:9).

   Evidentialist-style arguments have a substantial degree of subjectivity involved in them. Their effectiveness depends upon the worldview of the one evaluating the evidence.

   To subject the canon to a standard outside itself is to place another authority over it.

   The canon can change as each generation's scholars reconsider the evidence for themselves.

   Historical evidence for the apostolicity of the NT nooks is an effective means of authenticating canon only when it is viewed as a means provided by the scriptures and governed by the scriptures, along with the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

2. **The Criteria of Canonicity.**

   There is a misunderstanding of the role played by the criteria of canonicity in the earlier church. The term gives the impression that the early church consciously developed a set of standards for what constituted a canonical book and then expressly went out to find books that met those criteria. However, the early church did not choose the books, but they received what had been handed

down to them from the very start. The "criteria" is an after-the-fact justification for the book that had long been recognized as canonical.

Inadequate Criteria

- Orthodoxy
- Usage
- Antiquity or date

Apostolicity is a necessary criteria but not sufficient alone.

The fundamental problem is, "What are the criteria that determine the criteria?"

The phrase "attributes of canonicity" is favored because it allows the Scripture (as our highest authority) to authenticate itself.

3. **The Priority of Historical Evidence.**

This model places such a high priority on historical evidence, one could get the impression that this is the only (or at least best) means by which the canon can be authenticated.

Largely overlooked are the internal characteristics.

Limited attention given to the role the church might have played in the authentication of canonical books.

There is a concern for the "manner" in which historical investigations are pursued.

Can lead to actually undermining the authority of scripture.