Theology of New Testament Canon (Lesson 3 & 4)

My Sheep Hear My Voice – Canon as Self-Authenticating

I. **The concept of the self-authenticating canon**
- John Calvin "God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word…"
- SOFBC SOF - We believe that the Holy Bible was written by men controlled by the Holy Spirit; that it has truth without an admixture of error for its matter; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the age, **the only complete and final revelation** of the will of God to man; the true center of Christian union and **the supreme standard** by which all human conduct, creeds and opinions should be tried.
- The scriptures themselves provide grounds for considering external data: the apostolicity of books, the testimony of the church, and so forth.
- To say that the canon is self-authenticating is simply to recognize that one cannot authenticate the canon without appealing to the canon.
- The canon as the word of god, is not just true, but the criterion of truth. It is an **ultimate authority**.
- William Alston, "There is no escape from epistemic circularity in the assessment of our fundamental sources of belief."
- We are not trying to prove scripture in this model, but rather using scripture or better yet applying scripture to the question of which books belong in the New testament.
- We are appealing to a Christian world to determine whether we have a justifiable belief that we have the right books in our canon.

II. **The components of a self-authenticating canon**

When we do apply the Scripture to the question of which books belong in the canon, we shall see that it testifies to the fact that God has created the proper epistemic environment wherein belief in the New Testament canon can be reliably formed. This epistemic environment includes three components:

- *Providential exposure.* In order for the church to be able to recognize the books of the canon, it must first be providentially exposed to these books. The church cannot recognize a book that it does not have.
- *Attributes of canonicity.* These attributes are basically characteristics that distinguish canonical books from all other books. There are three attributes of canonicity: (1) divine qualities (canonical books bear the "marks" of divinity), (2) corporate reception (canonical books are recognized by the church as a whole), and (3) apostolic origins (canonical books are the result of the redemptive-historical activity of the apostles).
- *Internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.* In order for believers to rightly recognize these attributes of canonicity, the Holy Spirit works to overcome the noetic effects of sin and produces belief that these books are from God.

These three components must all be in place if we are to have knowledge of the canon. We cannot know canonical books unless we have access to those books (providential exposure); we need some way to distinguish canonical books from other books (attributes of canonicity); and we need to have some basis for thinking we can rightly identify these attributes (internal work of the Spirit). We now turn our attention to these components.

a. **Providential Exposure**

The church cannot respond (positively or negatively) to a book of which it has no knowledge. Christ's promise that his sheep will respond to his voice pertains only to books that have had their voice actually heard by the sheep (John 10:27). If God intended to give a canon to his corporate church—and not just to an isolated congregation for a limited period of time—then we have every reason to believe that he would providentially preserve these books and expose them to the church so that, through the Holy Spirit, it can rightly recognize them as canonical. As Evans has argued, the fact that certain books are lost "provides reason to think that God did not desire those writings to be included in the authorized revelation."

There could always be an unknown number of books left out of the canon—not because the church rejected them, but because they were lost before they could even be evaluated. Fortunately, we have good biblical grounds for affirming God's intent in giving his Word to his church (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17) and God's sovereign ability to accomplish it (Ps. 135:6; Dan. 4:35; Acts 17:25–28; Eph. 1:11; Heb. 1:3).

Distinction between Scripture and canon. This distinction is only applicable to the narrow foundational and redemptive-historical period of the apostles and driven by their God-given function as caretakers and founders of the church. During this unique apostolic phase, canonicity was a subset of Scripture—all canonical books were Scripture, but not necessarily all scriptural books were canonical.

Canonical books, as we have defined them here, cannot be lost. If they are lost, then they were never canonical books to begin with. So, even if we were to discover Paul's lost letter in the desert sands today, we would not place it into the canon as the twenty-eighth book. Instead, we would simply recognize that God had not preserved this book to be a permanent foundation for the church. Putting such a letter into the canon now would not change that fact; it could not make a book foundational that clearly never was.

b. **Attributes of canonicity and the Holy Spirit**

It is now clear that we are only dealing with (and can only deal with) the books we have available to us. And in this regard, we trust in the providence of God that the books available to us are the ones he intended. But, of course, this is just the very first step. Next, we must distinguish among these books available to us. How do we know which are canonical? The answer lies in the attributes of canonicity and the role of the Holy Spirit, to which we now turn.

   i. **Divine Qualities - "Canonical books bear the 'marks' of divinity" (Kruger)**
   - the "imprint" of the Spirit - the divine qualities or divine character of a book from God.
   - These "marks" (or indicia) can include a variety of things, but traditionally include the Scripture's beauty, efficacy (the ability to produce a desired or intended result), and harmony.
   - Divine Qualities in Nature
     - Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork."
     - Romans 1:20 - For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.
   - If the created world **(general revelation)** is able to speak clearly that it is from God, then how much more so would the canon of Scripture **(special revelation)** speak clearly that it is from God? Murray draws this same connection: "If the heavens declare the glory of God and

therefore bear witness to their divine creator, the Scripture as God's handiwork must also bear the imprints of his authorship."

- The testimonium is not a private revelation of the Spirit or new information given to the believer—as if the list of canonical books were whispered in our ears—but it is a work of the Spirit that overcomes the noetic effects of sin (Rom. 3:10–18) and produces the belief that the Scriptures are the word of God. The reason some refuse to believe the Scriptures is not that there is any defect or lack of evidence in the Scriptures (the indicia are clear and objective) but that those without the Spirit do not accept the things from God (1 Cor. 2:10–14).
- Jesus himself affirmed this reality when he declared, "My sheep [i.e., those with the Spirit] hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). Likewise, he said of his sheep, "A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (John 10:5). Put simply, canonical books are received by those who have the Holy Spirit in them. When people's eyes are opened, they are struck by the divine qualities of Scripture—its beauty, harmony, efficacy—and recognize and embrace Scripture for what it is, the word of God. They realize that the voice of Scripture is the voice of the Shepherd.
- In the existential/neoorthodox model the Scripture does not bear divine qualities in and of itself, but functions as the Word of God only when the Spirit decides to use it. In this sense, the authority of Scripture is utterly contingent on the subjective experience of those who receive it. The Spirit becomes the grounds of the canon's authority, not the means to recognizing it. In contrast, the self-authenticating model understands the testimonium not as something that stands by itself, but as **something that always stands in conjunction with the objective qualities of Scripture.** Thus, when a Christian embraces the Scriptures as the word of God, his actions are fully rational and warranted because they rest on the most sure basis possible—the divine attributes of Scripture. So, while there is a subjective aspect to the self-authenticating model, it is not subjectivism.

ii. **Corporate Reception - "Canonical books are recognized by the church as a whole" (Kruger)**
- First, God's redemptive pattern has not been simply to redeem individuals, but to redeem a people, a church, for himself (Acts 15:14; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9). And when God, by his redemptive activity, creates a covenant community, he then gives them covenant documents that testify to that redemption. The canon cannot rule a community unless it is received by that community.
- Second, if we affirm the efficacy of the testimonium on an individual level, why should we be less willing to affirm its efficacy on the corporate-covenantal level? It is the church, and not just the individual, that is given the Spirit: the church is God's house (1 Tim. 3:15), also called a "spiritual house" (1 Pet. 2:5), and is a body with one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). All of this suggests that if we doubt the testimonium on a corporate level, we would be compelled to doubt it equally on an individual level.
- Third, the covenantal-corporate aspect of the testimonium is historic. It is here that we begin to see the proper role of the church in the authentication of canon. The books received by the church inform our understanding of which books are canonical not because the church is infallible or because it created or constituted the canon, but because the church's reception of these books is a natural and inevitable outworking of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture.
- We have every biblical reason to believe that the Spirit's work within the hearts of his people (both individually and corporately) is effectual and that Christ makes good on his promise that "my sheep hear my voice . . . and they follow me" (John 10:27). Tthis does not mean that we should expect to find perfect unity among the church, but it does mean that we should expect to find a corporate or covenantal unity—which is precisely what we do find.

iii. **Apostolic Origins - "Canonical books are the result of the redemptive-historical activity of the apostles." (Kruger)**
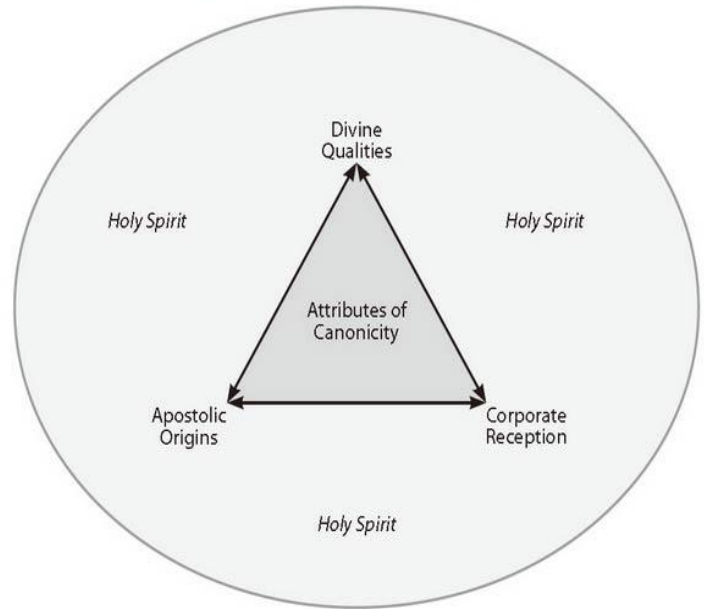
- This redemptive-historical aspect of the canon is clearly visible in the fact that the two main covenants of Scripture—the old (Sinaitic) covenant and the new covenant—both are established in written form after God's special (and powerful) redemptive work was accomplished (e.g., Ex. 20:2; John 20:31).

- In regard to the establishment of the new covenant, the message of redemption in Jesus Christ was entrusted to the apostles of Christ, to whom he gave his full authority and power: "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10:16). The apostles are the link between the redemptive events themselves and the subsequent announcement of those events.70 Not only did the apostles themselves write many of these New Testament documents, but, in a broader sense, they presided over the transmission of the apostolic deposit and labored to make sure that the message of Christ was firmly and accurately preserved for future generations, through the help of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:1–4; Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3; Gal. 1:9; Phil. 4:9; Col. 2:6–8; 1 Thess. 2:13–15; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14; 2 Pet. 2:21; Jude 1:3). Thus, the New Testament canon is not so much a collection of writings by apostles, but a collection of apostolic writings—writings that bear the authoritative message of the apostles and derive from the foundational apostolic era (even if not directly from their hands).

- The early church fathers certainly understood this connection between apostolicity and canonical books. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, recognized the unique role of the apostles: "I am not enjoining [commanding] you as Peter and Paul did. They were apostles, I am condemned."

- Of course, if one of the attributes of canonicity is a book's apostolic origins, then this entails an appeal to some external historical evidences to establish whether a book is apostolic. Exploring the apostolic origins of these books not only works positively (showing they are apostolic), but also works negatively (showing that other books are not).

  a. External evidence Is part of the application of Scripture - Whenever we apply Scripture to any issue, it will inevitably involve external evidence from the world around us. But the use of such evidence is not inconsistent with the self-authenticating model because it does not stand alone but is interpreted and understood by the norm of Scripture.

  b. External evidence can provide adequate grounds for a belief through the work of the Holy Spirit - It is entirely appropriate for a single canonical model to have attributes that are more immediately or intuitively known (the divine qualities of a book) and attributes that are known through some awareness of external evidence (apostolic origins of a book). Whether a belief is basic or based on evidence, we have adequate grounds for affirming that belief if it is produced by the Holy Spirit.

  c. Apostolicity is not the only attribute of canonicity - In the self--authenticating model, as opposed to the criteria-of-canonicity model, the historical evidence for apostolicity does not stand alone but stands in conjunction with the other attributes of canonicity, divine qualities and corporate reception. Since all apostolic books also bear divine qualities (by virtue of their inspiration), then divine qualities, in one sense, can function as evidence for apostolicity.

III. Implications of a self-authenticating canon

a. Attributes of canonicity as mutually reinforcing

i. n the end, the self-authenticating model of canon actually serves to unite the various canonical models by acknowledging that no one attribute is ultimate. Because these three attributes are so interdependent, one can look at the entire question of canon through the lens of just one attribute. Thus, in a sense, all three attributes are about apostolic origins. Apostolic origins are not only about the historical background of a book, but also about the qualities produced by apostolic origins and how it leads to corporate reception in the church. Likewise, all three attributes are, in a sense, about divine qualities. Divine qualities are not only about the internal marks of a book, but also about where the divine qualities come from and the impact those qualities have on the church. And, in a sense, all three attributes are about corporate reception. Corporate reception is not only about the response of the church to a book, but also about those things that make that response possible, namely, the divine qualities and apostolic origins of a book. Thus, all three attributes are critical if we are to have a biblical understanding of canon.

Figure 1. The self-authenticating model

b. Balanced definition of canon

i. The New Testament canon is the collection of apostolic writings that is regarded as Scripture by the corporate church. Of course, as we use the word canon throughout this study, we may focus upon just one of the three aspects of this definition at any given time. Therefore, it is important that the reader carefully note the following: while all canonical books (eventually) have all three attributes of canonicity, the term canon can still be used for a book before it has all three attributes of canonicity. For example, the Gospel of John was "canon" ten minutes after it was written even though it was not yet received by the corporate church. Again, the self-authenticating model is not arguing that the corporate reception of the church makes a book canonical. This stands in contrast with the community-determined models, which often make a book's canonicity contingent on corporate reception. Instead, this model argues that a book can be canonical prior to corporate reception, but cannot be canonical if it never has corporate reception.

IV. Potential defeaters of the self-authenticating canon

The essence of the self-authenticating model is that Christians have a rational basis (or warrant) for affirming the twenty-seven books of the New Testament canon because God has created the proper epistemic environment wherein belief in the canon can be reliably formed. However, that is not all that needs to be said. Even if one has a rational basis for holding to a belief, that belief still faces the possibility of epistemic defeat by other beliefs that one might come to hold. Such "defeaters" are the kind of beliefs that would challenge or undercut a prior belief, giving one reason to think that the prior belief is false.102 For example, imagine John wakes up in the morning, and after seeing that his alarm clock says 9:00 a.m., he forms the belief that he is late for work. But as he scrambles to get ready, his

wife informs him that their three-year-old daughter was playing with the alarm clock the night before and likely changed the time. This new information would serve as a defeater for John's prior belief that he was late for work, even though that prior belief was entirely justified.

Likewise, when it comes to our belief in the New Testament canon, there are potential defeaters that might serve to bring doubt upon the grounds of our belief. In a volume this size it is not possible to mention all potential canonical defeaters, so we will focus upon the primary ones. These primary defeaters are usually designed to challenge the attributes of canonicity discussed above and whether these attributes really provide a means of identifying canonical books. The three main defeaters are the following:

The challenge to divine qualities: apparent disagreements and/or contradictions between New Testament books. This defeater is designed to argue against the existence of divine qualities in these books. If New Testament books are inconsistent with one another—as many scholars have claimed—then how could they really be from God? How could canonical books bear internal marks of their divinity if they prove to be a disparate collection of writings with different theologies and different doctrines?

The challenge to apostolic origins: a number of New Testament books were not written by apostles. Although we have argued here that all canonical books are apostolic, much of modern scholarship argues that a number of our New Testament books are pseudonymous forgeries. For instance, of all of Paul's epistles, only seven are widely regarded as authentic (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). In the face of such claims, how can we claim that all canonical books are apostolic?

The challenge to corporate reception: there was widespread disagreement in the early church that lasted well into the fourth century (and beyond). In this chapter we have argued that the consensus of the corporate church is part of how we identify canonical books because such books would have imposed themselves on the church via the work of the Holy Spirit. But is the significance of the consensus of the church not called into question when we recognize the widespread disagreement and confusion that existed in early Christianity about the extent of the canon? If the church experienced disarray over canonical books from the very start, should this not raise doubts about whether the Spirit was really at work? Moreover, there are segments of the church still today that have a different New Testament canon (e.g., the Syrian Orthodox Church has a twenty-two-book canon). Are we to think that these churches do not have the Spirit?

These potential defeaters raise important questions about the canon that, unfortunately, cannot be addressed adequately in a single volume. Nevertheless, we will attempt to provide at least a preliminary response to each of them throughout the remaining chapters. In addition to responding to these defeaters, the rest of this volume will also probe deeper into each of the three attributes of canonicity and how they help us understand the origins and development of the New Testament.