

Sunday, September 23, 2018— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 59 Introduction to Canonical Models

Canonical Insecurities

- The question of canonicity endures as one of the perennial questions faced by any believer living in our current postmodern age. Popular books such as Dan Brown’s *DaVinci Code* call into question whether the church has accurately identified what books should be in the New Testament.
- On the more scholarly side, German author D. F. Strauss has called the issue of canonicity the “Achilles’ Heel of Protestant Christianity.” Meanwhile, Herman Ridderbos views the problem of canonicity as “the hidden, dragging illness of the Church.” (Kurjer, 15)
- How do we know that the New Testament should have 27 books and not 26, 28, or some other number? Michael J. Kruger, author of *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* points out that these sorts of questions are to be expected when one considers the unique origins of the New Testament:
 - “Of course, such a question would not be asked if the New Testament were like most other books, formed (more or less) all at the same time, in the same place, by a single author. Instead, with the boundaries of the New Testament we are faced with a rather complex array of different, books, authors, geographical settings, theological perspectives, and historical contexts that are all brought together into one unified volume. What do all these books share in common? What was the process by which they were brought together? And why should the results of that process be considered normative for the modern church?” (Kruger, 16)
- Questions regarding the canon are of foundational significance regarding the sorts of questions being asked by skeptics and critics in our day.
 - “. . . if Christians cannot adequately answer these questions about the canonical boundaries of the New Testament, then on what ground could they ever appeal to the content of the New Testament? Certainly, there can be no New Testament theology if there is no such thing as a New Testament in the first place.” (Kruger, 160)
- Consequently, the question of the canon is at the heart of how biblical authority is established. Critics of biblical Christianity have long recognized the significance of the canon question and have therefore focused much of their scholarly energies on that very issue. For example, Bart Ehrman declares the canon to be an “invention” of the dominant Christian factions of early Christianity designed to suppress (or oppress) other factions of the church with different theological convictions. (Ehrman, 229-246)
- Kurjer outlines three reasons why canonical studies continue to be a point of contention between believers and critics:

- “First, modern critical scholarship has continued to raise doubt about the authorship and date of numerous New Testament books, attributing many of them to later, pseudonymous authors. Not only are the traditional authors of the canonical Gospels rejected, but the Pauline letters of Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles are deemed to be inauthentic, along with books like 2 Peter, Jude, and others.” (Kruger, 17-18)
- “Second, the last century and a half have been filled with sensational discoveries of apocryphal materials that have raised new questions about which books should be included in the canon [the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, and the *Gospel of Judas*] . . . Such discoveries have spurred all sorts of publications with provocative titles that raise questions about the state of the canon; for example, *The Five Lost Gospels*, *Lost Scriptures*, and *Forgotten Scriptures*.” (Kruger, 18-19)
- “Third, the continued influence of Walter Bauer’s book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (1934) has kept the canonical issue open. Bauer argued that early Christianity was originally very diverse and varied, with no clear orthodox or heretical camp. What would later be called “orthodoxy” was simply the beliefs of the one group that triumphed over all the others. Thus, the books of the New Testament canon are simply the books of the “winners” of the early church power struggles, but do not necessarily represent “original” Christianity and should not be considered normative for Christians.” (Kruger, 19)
- According to Bauer’s thesis, apocryphal books have just as much validity as any other Christian books.
- The challenges to canonicity identified above have led to epistemological crisis for many believers.
 - “If the early church was a theological quagmire, if the apocryphal books are as valid as so-called canonical books, and if scholars are convinced the New Testament is filled with forgeries, then on what possible basis can Christians have confidence that they have the right twenty-seven books? How can Christians even know such a thing?” (Kruger, 19-20)
- It is in answering these questions that we find the central thesis of Kruger’s book.
 - “This volume is concerned with the narrow question of whether Christians have a rational basis (i.e., intellectually sufficient grounds) for affirming that only these twenty-seven books rightly belong in the New Testament canon. Or, put differently, is the Christian belief in the canon justified (or warranted)?” (Kruger, 20)
- Kruger is quick to point out the circumscribed limitations of his thesis by discussing the difference between *de facto* and *de jure* objections to the concept of canonicity.

- *De facto*— “This objection argues that the Christian belief in the canon is intellectually unacceptable on the grounds that it is a false belief. *De facto* objections are quite common in modern canonical studies and have taken a variety of forms: for example, these books cannot be from God because they contradict each other; or because they are forgeries, or because they are merely the choice of the “winners” or early theological battles. Regardless of the specific form of the *de facto* objection, the overall claim is the same—the Christians belief in the canon should be rejected because it isn't true.” (Kruger, 20)
- *De jure*— “The *de jure* objection argues not so much that Christian belief in the canon is false, but that Christians have no rational basis for thinking they could ever know such a thing in the first place. Given the chaos of early Christianity and the various disagreements over books—not to mention scholarly claims that some of these books are pseudonymous—it would be irrational for Christians to claim that they know these twenty-seven are the right ones. Thus, on the *de jure* objection, the problem with the Christian belief in canon is something other than its truth or falsehood, but has to do with whether Christians have adequate grounds for holding such a belief.” (Kruger, 21)
- Our goal in discussing canonicity as part of this class is more *de jure* in nature. Rather than discussing our knowledge of the canon (or proving the truth of canon) our aim is to account for knowledge of the canon. Put another way, does the Christian faith provide sufficient grounds for thinking that Christians can know which books belong in the canon and which do not?
- This means that our explanation of the topic will not be purely historical but also theological.
 - “How can the Christian religion account for its knowledge of the canon without talking about the Christian understanding of the way knowledge is acquired? . . . The canon can only be rightly understood (and defended) when both history and theology are taken into account. They should be in a dialogical relationship with one another—as allies, not adversaries.” (Kruger, 22)
- In other words, whatever one believes about the canon needs to be scriptural in its approach. History should be interpreted through the prism of scripture not the other way around.
 - “The theology of the canon is viewed not as an “epilogue” to be addressed only after the formal investigation of the historical evidence is complete, but instead as the paradigm through which the historical evidence is investigated in the first place.” (Kruger, 24)
- The approach set forth by Kruger is essentially the same as the one we utilized when we did the Grace History Project. Recall that we first established what scriptures said about the church and then judged the history through the prism of scripture not the other way around. For this reason, I have affinity for Kruger’s work, it has the correct presuppositional starting point.

What is a Canonical Model?

- According to Kruger, “too little attention has been given to understanding overarching canonical models that often determine one’s definition of the canon in the first place.” (Kruger, 28)
- Kruger defines a canonical model as follows:
 - “A canonical model is just a way of describing a particular canonical system if you wish, which includes the broader methodological, epistemological, and, yes, even theological frameworks for how canon is understood, and, most importantly, how canon is authenticated. Everyone who studies the origins of the canon has such a system, or process, (whether clearly thought out or not) by which he or she distinguishes a canonical book from a noncanonical book. Thus, a canonical model is not to be equated simply with one’s historical conclusions about when and how these books became authoritative, but instead it describes the broader methodological approach that lead to those conclusions. It is not just a date of canonicity (or even its definition), but the grounds of canonicity—how does one go about determining which book, or which set of books, belongs in the canon? A canonical model, is then, one’s canonical worldview.” (Kruger, 28)
- What we will be looking at in coming lessons is not simply a choice between historical positions (early or late dates) on the canon, but a choice between canonical models or overarching systems or approaches from how to approach the question of canonicity.
- The various models will not be categorized on the basis of date or definition (as is commonly done) but on the method employed in authenticating canon or on what grounds does one consider a book to be canonical. Stated differently, on what grounds does one know that a book belongs or does not belong in the New Testament.
- Please note that categorizing models in this manner (on the basis of how they authenticate books) might group authors together who disagree on other particulars such as the definition and date of the canon.

Summary of Canonical Models

- Kruger outlines three different models for determining the borders of the canon. These models include the following:
 - *Community-Determined Model*—holds that the canon is determined by its reception or recognition by individuals or the church.
 - “As a general description, community-determined approaches view the 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. Canonicity is viewed not as something inherent to any set of books, but as “something officially or authoritatively imposed upon certain literature.” Thus, canon does not exist until there is some sort of response from the community.

Simply put, it is the result of actions and/or experiences of Christians.” (Kruger, 29-30)

- *Historically-Determined Model*—maintains that if historical investigations can demonstrate that a book possessed apostolic content or authority it should be regarded as canonical.
 - “These models deny that the Christian community’s reception of the canon is definitive in establishing its authority and instead seek to establish it by critically investigating the historical merits of each of the canonical books. . . . 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 examples of the historically determined models reach very different conclusions, ranging from a rejection of most of the twenty-seven books (canon-within-the-canon model) to an acceptance of all twenty-seven books (criteria-of-canoncity model). But the methodology is the same: canon is authenticated via historical investigation into these books.” (Kruger, 67)
- *Self-Authenticating Model*—holds that the scriptures authenticated themselves in the hearts and minds of believers when they were written.
 - “A self-authenticating model of canon would take into account something that the other models have largely overlooked: the content of the canon itself. Rather than looking only to its reception (community determined), or only to its origins (historically determined model), this model would, in a sense, let the canon have a voice in its own authentication.” (Kruger, 89)
- In the coming lessons we will be exploring all three of these models in greater detail in order to establish a firm grasp on how we can have confidence in our present collection of 27 New Testament books.

Works Cited

Ehrman, Bart D. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Kruger, Michael J. *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.