Sunday, September 30, 2018— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 60 Understanding Canonical Models: Community-Determined Model

## Introduction

- In Lesson 58 we began looking at issues related to the subject of canonicity or the process of determining which books ought to be included in the Bible. In doing so we considered the following issues:

    o Concept of Canon—scriptural foundation

    o Old Testament Precedent for a New Testament Canon

    o Marcion and the Traditional View of the Canon

- More recently, Lesson 59 looked at insecurities some Christians have with respect to the canon as well as the different canonical models that have been utilized to establish the boundaries of the New Testament. In summation, Lesson 59 touched upon the following:

    o Canonical Insecurities

        ▪ *De Facto* and *De Jure* objections

    o What is a Canonical Model?

    o Summary of Canonical Models

        ▪ Community-Determined Model

        ▪ Historically-Determined Model

        ▪ Self-Authenticating Model

- Today, in Lesson 60, we will begin our survey of each of these models in order to ascertain the veracity of each one. We will begin with a consideration of the Community-Determined Model.

## Community-Determined Model

- Community-Determined Model—holds that the canon is determined by its reception or recognition by individuals or the church.

    o "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)

- Kruger points out that specific examples of this model vary quite widely in their approach to determining the boundaries of the canon.

  o "Specific examples of the community-determined model, as we will see below, can vary quiet widely.  Some view the canon as somewhat of a historical accident (the historical-critical model); some view it as the result of the inspired declarations of the church (the Roman Catholic model); and others view it as an "event" that takes place when the Spirit works through these books and impacts individuals (the existential/neoorthodoxy model).  But all share this in common: when asked how one knows which books are canonical, they all find the answer in the response of the Christian community." (Kruger, 30)

*Historical-Critical Model*

- "Since the rise of historical criticism during the period of the Enlightenment, scholars have argued that the idea of a canon, with its particular boundaries, is simply (or largely) the product of human activities within the church during the early centuries of Christianity." (Kruger, 30)

- James Barr epitomizes the over emphasis on the human element in the canonical discussions from the 18th and 19th centuries when he states:

  o "The decision[s] to collect a group of chosen books and form a 'Scripture,' are all human decisions." (quoted in Kruger, 30)

- When viewed as the product of normal human process, the basis for the canon becomes a manmade activity and preference.  The traditional view of the canon as it pertains to Marcion that we discussed in Lesson 58 is an example of this type of thinking.  On the traditional view, the formation of the canon was a creative act of the church in response to Marcion's heretical teachings.  Subtract the alleged beliefs of Marcion and there is no canon.  In other words, the notion of canon is "just a social phenomenon that arises when a community desires to express its identity." (Kruger, 31)

  o "From this perspective, to say a text is canonical is not so much to speak of the text at all, but to speak about the function of the text within a particular religious community.  And still others have understood canon as a political construct, an ideological instrument, created to wield power and control." (Kruger, 31)

- These notions are essentially the same as what we observed in Lesson 59 from the pen of Bart Ehrman; "orthodoxy" or "heresy" in early Christianity did not exist, but rather various Christianities.  Consequently, the New Testament canon is nothing more than the books chosen by the theological winners.

- Regardless of which version of the historical-critical approach ones takes it can be summed up by the following comments from Kruger:

- o "... the canon is a fundamentally human construct that can be adequately accounted for in purely natural terms... The issue is not about which books should be in the canon, but simply which books are in the canon. Since the canon is an entirely human creation, all we can do is simply describe what happened in history... "canon" is not something that describes the quality of a book, but something that was done to books... Canonical status is not an intrinsic quality of a text, but a status bestowed upon it by a community of interpreters." (Kruger, 32)

- Following this train of thought to its logical conclusion, there is no canon until a community of believers acts to establish one.

  - o "If canon is something that is created and constituted by the community, and there is nothing inherent in these books to make them canonical, then a canon cannot exist before the community formally acts." (Kruger, 33)

- Proponents of this view such as A. C. Sundberg insist upon a strict semantic difference between Scripture and canon.

  - o "Sandberg employs an exclusive definition of canon, arguing that it is a fixed, final, closed list of books, and therefore we cannot use the term canon to speak of any second (or even third-) century historical realities. To do so would be "anachronistic." Although Scripture would have existed prior to this time period, Sundberg argues that we must reserve the term canon until the end of the entire process." (Kruger, 34)

- On a positive note, the historical-critical model is correct to remind us of the role played by the believers in establishing the boundaries of the canon. "Indeed, the canon did not drop from the sky on golden tablets, fully formed and complete" (Kruger, 34), the body of Christ played a role it its development.

- That being said, the church did not play the determinative and decisive role in establishing the canon as this model asserts. This view ignores any claims that these books contain any intrinsic authority that might have played a role in their reception.

  - o "The canon is instead explained as merely the result of the "contingent" choices of the church. Such an approach provides us with a merely human canon stripped of any normative or revelational authority and thereby unable to function as God's word to his people. Thus, the historical-critical approach does not really construct a positive model of canon, per se, but rather *deconstruct*s the canon entirely, leaving us with an empty shell of books." (Kruger, 35)

*Roman Catholic Model*

- The Roman Catholic model shares a common methodology with regard to how the canon is authenticated with the historical-critical model.

  - o "Roman Catholicism denies that ultimate authority exists in the Scriptures alone (*sola scriptura*) and has consequently adopted the well-known trifold authority structure that

includes Scripture, tradition, and the Magisterium (the church's teaching authority)." (Kruger, 38-39)

- Manifested in the authority vested in the church hierarchy (bishops, cardinals, pope, and councils), the Magisterium is not merely one of three sources of authority as it is commonly portrayed in Catholic dogma.

  o ". . . it [the Magisterium] is distinguished by the fact that it alone has the right to interpret Scripture and tradition, and, more importantly, it has the sole authority to define what writings constitute Scripture and tradition in the first place." (Kruger, 39)

- The Roman Catholic model is a Community-Determined model because it requires the ruling of the Magisterium to establish the boundaries of the canon.

  o "The fundamental challenge from Roman Catholicism is that in order to have an infallible Scripture, we need to have an infallible guide (namely, the church) to tell us what is, and what is not, Scripture. As Karl Rahner asserts, "[Scripture] exists because the church exists." Thus, it is argued, the Protestant claim of *sola scriptura* is inevitably hollow—you cannot have Scripture as the ultimate authority if you have no certain way of knowing what Scripture is. One needs an external source of authority, outside of the Bible, in order to know what should be included in the Bible. . . The sixteenth-century Roman Catholic cardinal Stanislaus Hosius, papal legate to the Council of Trent, put it more bluntly: "The Scriptures have only as much force as the fables of Aesop, if destitute of the authority of the Church."" (Kruger, 39-40)

- Even within the Roman Catholic model there are divergent opinions regarding the relationship between church and canon.

  o "One Catholic conception of the church-canon relationship views the church not as creating or constituting the canon, but merely as recognizing the authority of the canon that was already there. On this conception, the church's role is primarily epistemological—it is the sole and fundamental means by which we infallibly know which books belong in the canon. It is only in this sense that one could say the canon is dependent upon the church." (Kruger, 41)

  o "Another Catholic approach views the church not simply as the means by which the canon is infallibly recognized (although it does affirm this), but as, in some sense, the foundation or the grounds for the canon. "As Rahner puts it, we "derive the essence of the Scripture from the essence of the church," and therefore the Scripture is "derivative" from the church and "an act of the church." This sentiment is echoed by Peter Kreeft, who argues that the church "caused" the canon because it preceded the canon: "The first generation of Christians did not even have the New Testament." Hans Kung states it more directly: "Without the Church there would be no New Testament."" (Kruger, 42)

- The Roman Catholic model is predicated on the *a priori* belief that no document could ever be self-asserting. Put another way, built into the Roman model is the assumption that any written revelation required external approval and authentication from an infallible church. This approach

overlooks or at the very least minimizes the internal qualities inherent to the New Testament documents themselves.

- Ephesians 2:20— "Although the New Testament was not completed all at once, the apostolic teaching was the substance of what would later become the New Testament. And it was this apostolic teaching, along with the prophets, that formed the foundation for the church, rather than the other way around. As Ephesians 2:20 affirms, the church was "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" . . . "The biblical canon is not a creation of the church, the church is instead a creation of the biblical canon." The earliest Christians did have a canon, namely, the Old Testament itself (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6; 2 Tim. 3:15-16), which seems to have existed just fine prior to the founding of the church. . . From the very earliest days, 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). Thus, the Scriptures themselves never give the impression that their authority was "derivative" from the church, or from some future ecclesiastical decision. . . It is God's activity to inspire the biblical authors that produced the Scriptures. He, not the church, determined what would be inspired and what would not." (Kruger, 44-46)

- All this leads to a very poignant question with respect to the Roman Catholic model; does it make the scriptures subordinate to the church? Put another way, how does the Roman Catholic church establish its own authority?

  o "If the Roman Catholic Church believes that infallible authorities (like the Scriptures) require external authentication, then to what authority does the church turn to establish the grounds for its own infallible authority?" (Kruger, 46)

- According to Michael Kruger, Rome has three potential answers to these questions:

  o "The church could claim that its infallible authority is authenticated by (and derived from) the Scriptures. But this proves to be rather vicious circular reasoning. If the Scriptures cannot be known and authenticated without the authority of the church, then you cannot establish the authority of the church on the basis of the Scriptures." (Kruger, 46-47)

  o "The church could claim that its infallible authority is authenticated by external evidence from the history of the church: the origins of the church, the character of the church, the progress of the church, and so forth. However, these are not infallible grounds by which the church's infallibility could be established. In addition, the history of the Roman Church is not a pure one—the abuses, corruption, documented papal errors, and the like do not naturally lead one to conclude that the church is infallible . . ." (Kruger, 47)

  o ". . . the only option left to the Catholic model is to declare that the church's authority is self-authenticating and needs no external authority to validate it. Or, more bluntly put, we ought to believe in the infallibility of the Roman Catholic Church because it says so. The Catholic Church, then, finds itself in the awkward place of having chided the Reformers for having a self-authenticating authority (*sola scriptura*), while all the while

it has engaged in that very same activity by setting itself up as a self-authenticating authority (*sola ecclesia*)." (Kruger, 47-48)

- On the Catholic model, the scripture's own claims of authority are dismissed while their own claims to authority should be received by their own authority. At the end of day, the Catholic Church is functionally committed to the doctrine of *sola ecclesia* or by the church alone.

- All of this leads us to ask the following question with respect to the Roman Catholic position on the canon. How can there be any canon at all?

  o ". . . at least one that can genuinely challenge, correct, and transform the church—if the validation structure for the canon, in effect, already presupposes that the church bears an authority that is even higher? On the Catholic system, then, the canon's authority is substantially diminished. What authority it does have must be construed as purely derivative—less a rule over the church and more an arm of the church, not something that determines the church's identity but something that merely expresses it." (Kruger, 48)

*Existential/Neoorthodox Model*

- Please recall from Lesson 11 that we discussed the Existential View of scriptures when we surveyed the various views of inspiration.

  o "The *Existential View* says that the only parts of the Bible that are inspired are the parts that speak to you." (Lesson 11)

- Unlike the Historical-Critical and Roman Catholic models discussed above, the Existential/Neoorthodox model tends toward a more individualistic and experiential approach. "The locus of authority is found not in the Scriptures themselves but ultimately in the individual who engages with them." (Kruger, 59)

- On this view, "authority exists when (and only when) an individual experiences God's word and responds to it in faith." (Kruger, 59) Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolph Bultmann are the best proponents to this view of scripture.

- According to this view, each generation determines the canon for itself through its experiences.

  o "Which books are considered "apostolic"--and therefore in the canon—is determined by each generation's experience with those books. Thus, the canon of Scripture has "fluid edges" and will change from generation to generation. But Brunner goes even further and suggests what Barth only implied, namely, that God could speak to his church in books outside the Bible. After all, if truth is mediated through personal experience, who is to say that a person cannot hear God's voice in another book? Is God restricted to the Bible? Brunner simply takes his existential approach to its logical conclusion. . . Bultmann also leaves the door wide open to the possibility that such an encounter could happen through other books outside the canon." (Kruger, 63)

- The biggest problem with the Neoorthodox model is that it separates the authority of God from the authority of scripture. "The Scripture has no intrinsic authority, but is "contingent" upon whether God decides to use it." (Kruger, 64)

- Kruger summarizes the following problem with this canonical model:

  o "First, if the boundaries of the canon are determined solely by the existential experience of the community, then the boundaries of the canon are fluid and ever changing. And a perpetually uncertain canon is unable to function as an authoritative norm for the church. If the canon is regarded as an entirely personal and existential "event," then there can never be a "right" canon, but simply the "current" canon—the canon that the church is now using." (Kruger, 64-65)

  o "Second, if Scripture does not bear authority in itself and is contingent upon reception by the community, then the community begins to take on authority equal to (if not greater than) that of Scripture." (Kruger, 65)

  o "Third, if the existentialist model is correct that there is nothing distinctive about the biblical books, then the very concept of a canon is in jeopardy. . . If God can supernaturally speak through any book (in his sovereignty and power), then what difference does it make which books ended up in the canon?" (Kruger, 65-66)

## Conclusion

- To one degree or another all three of the views surveyed in this lesson seek to authenticate the canon by appealing to its reception by the Christian community either corporately or individually. As such, community reception becomes the defining characteristic of the canon.

- "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." (Kruger, 66)

- In the next lesson we will survey the various Historically-Determined canonical models.

### Works Cited

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