



Systematic Theology



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Session 3: The Canon of Scripture



The Modern Day Problem of Canon

- Modern Day Critical Biblical Scholarship
- The Influence of Bart Ehrman
- The popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*



The Crux of the Issue

Is there a method or a way for modern day believers to know whether or not a writing is or is not authoritative scripture?

In other words, how do we know that any given book of the Bible is the Bible?



The Crux of the Issue

Does Christianity provide a basis for knowing the Canon of Scripture?

- The resounding answer is YES!
- **We have both theological and philosophical grounds within Christianity to hold to our canon.**



Defining Canon

- Canon, in its most basic sense, means “an authoritative standard”
- The Biblical Canon refers to a book, books, or a collection of books that are themselves inspired and inerrant scripture from God



Defining Canon

- The Extrinsic Definition:
 - Canon is established by something imposed upon scripture that is outside of scripture
- The Intrinsic Definition of Canon:
 - Canon develops from within scripture itself.
 - Ontological Definition: “Canon in God’s Mind”
 - Functional Definition: Canon is the books used by 2nd century church as scripture
 - Exclusive Definition: Closed, authoritative list



Canonical Models

- **Community Determined Model:** We know the canon by looking at the Christian community's response to various books
- **Historically Determined Model:** We know the canon by looking at various historical criteria a book must meet to be considered canon
- **Self-Authenticating Model:** We know the canon by perceiving the marks of divinity in the content of the canon itself

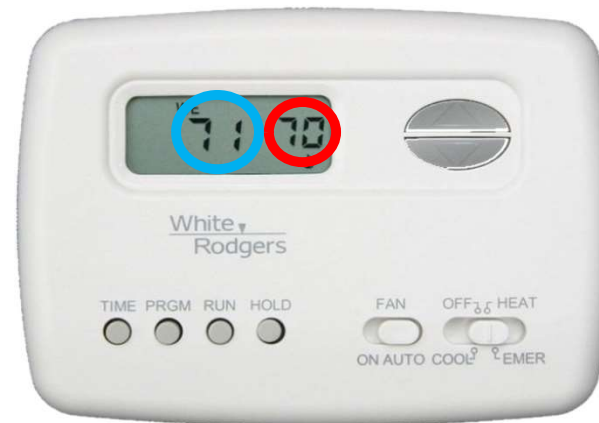


Community Determined Model

- Fundamental View: A book becomes canon by the community's response to and use of that book
- Major Community Determined Models:
 - **Historical-Critical Model:** Canon exists because humans picked the books
 - **Roman Catholic Model:** Canon is established by the church through tradition and the decrees of the magisterium
 - **Existential Model:** Canon exists when you hear the voice of God. It is an event, not an attribute.

Evaluation of Community Determined Model

- If the community is the final determinative factor regarding canon, then it is hard to avoid the implication that the community is over canon.
- Community does play a role, but not the only role and certainly not the absolute role!





Historically Determined Model

- **Fundamental View:** A book belongs in the canon because of certain, historical features of its origin
- **Four Main Criteria**
 - **Apostolicity:** Did an apostle write the book?
 - **Usage:** Did the early church use the book?
 - **Date:** Was the book written in the 1st century?
 - **Orthodoxy:** Does the book reflect orthodox Christian doctrine?



Evaluation of Historically Determined Model

- This is the second-best option as it emphasizes apostolicity and takes historical origins and reliability seriously
- However it has issues:
 - Neutral historical investigation is impossible
 - Canon is constantly in flux
 - Why are these criteria reliable?
 - Ultimately, it is not the method scripture itself gives us for determining canon.



Self-Authenticating Model

- The main weakness of other models is their grounding of canonicity in something outside the canon itself
- What we do not mean:
 - Not referring to self-attestation: the claims the scripture makes about itself
 - Not simply referring to the divine qualities of the scriptures



Self-Authenticating Model

- What we do mean:
 - Instead of looking at what scriptures says about itself, we instead are looking at what it *does*
 - We cannot authenticate the scriptures without appealing to the scriptures
 - The canon itself sets the terms for authenticating it – The Bible provides the way we know the canon.



Components of the Self-Authenticating Model

- Providential Exposure
- Attributes of Canonicity:
 - Marks of Divinity
 - Apostolic Authorship
 - Corporate Reception
- Testimony of the Holy Spirit



Providential Exposure

- God has decreed to save people from every nation and every time in history by means of His revelation
- Therefore, God **MUST** providentially expose humanity to that revelation until the end of the age
- If God gives books to His church, he would providentially preserve them- he would allow His people to possess them



Attributes of Canonicity

- **Marks of Divinity:** Just as nature bears the marks of its creator, so the scriptures bear the marks of their author



Westminster Confession

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.



Attributes of Canonicity

- **Marks of Divinity:**

- Beauty and Excellency:

- Scripture manifests the attributes of God
 - Scripture is beautiful because Christ is revealed in it
 - We love to hear the voice of our Shepherd

- Efficacy and Power

- Scripture does not just speak to us, it changes us

- Unity and Harmony

- Doctrinal Unity
 - Structural Unity



Attributes of Canonicity

• **Apostolic Authorship**

- God delivers his message during a distinct block of time through a distinct office: The Apostles
- Jesus Established Apostolic Authority (Luke 6:13, John 14:19, 25-26, Acts 1:8)
- Apostolic Authority Claimed by Apostles (Gal. 1:1, 2 Cor. 5:20, 2 Timothy 2:2)
- The voice of an apostle, when functioning in the office of an apostle, speaks the word of God
- Apostolic books became authoritative immediately on their transmission
- The writings of the apostles were immediately canon



Attributes of Canonicity

- **Corporate Reception**

- We should expect that individual believers in the church, when guided by the Holy Spirit, would agree on which books the Spirit leads them to recognize as God's Word, as there is only one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-11; Eph 4:4)
- Unanimity of the early church around the canon we possess and recognize is a reliable guide to canonicity.



Attributes of Canonicity

- **Was there unanimity among the Early Church regarding the canon?**
 - It is asserted that there was not canonical consensus until the 4th century
 - It is argued that the church, before the 4th century, was plagued by disagreements, chaos, and anarchy regarding the canon
 - While diversity certainly existed in the early church, diversity alone does not mean there cannot be a canon.



Attributes of Canonicity

• **The Canonical Core**

- There was a core canon in earlier Christianity from nearly the start
- 22 of the 27 books of the NT canon were decidedly in place by the end of the 1st century
- There was some debate on the remaining 5 or 6 disputed books
- The core was virtually undisputed
- Considering the Canonical Core, the contention that there was widespread theological diversity in the church in the main is shown to be fallacious.



Attributes of Canonicity

- **The Bible Speaks of Identifiable Authoritative Writings**
 - 2 Peter 3:15-16
 - 2 Peter 3:2
 - 1 Timothy 5:18
 - Exhortations to Public Readings
 - 1 Tim. 4:13; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 2 Cor. 10:9



Attributes of Canonicity

- **Evidence for Corporate Reception among the Apostolic Fathers**
 - **1 Clement:** Already recognizing letters by Paul as Scripture
 - **The Didache:** Quotes Matthew's gospel as scripture, warns them to not add or take away from what they have received
 - **Ignatius:** Spoke of Paul's letters
 - **Polycarp:** Quotes Ephesians as scripture
 - **Epistle of Barnabas:** Regards the writings of Matthew as Scripture
 - **Papias:** Speaks of the 4 gospels as scripture



Attributes of Canonicity

- **Corporate Reception**

- Evidence suggests a recognized canonical core by the middle of the 2nd century
- By the end of the 2nd century, lists were beginning to appear that list all but 4 or 5 of the books we consider canonical today
- Pervasive Canonical Pluralism just did not exist among the church
- The “canonical core” that developed very early shows that there was a uniform understanding of *orthodox* Christianity



Components of the Self-Authenticating Model

- Providential Exposure
- Attributes of Canonicity:
 - Marks of Divinity
 - Apostolic Authorship
 - Corporate Reception
- Testimony of the Holy Spirit



Attributes of Canonicity

• **Testimony of the Holy Spirit**

- Ultimately, the way we know if a book is from God, comes through the internal witness of God's Holy Spirit in the scripture itself.
- While the other aspects of canonicity are *necessary*, they cannot stand on their own
- This final aspect of our model of canonicity is supremely necessary and it can stand alone as a reliable way of knowing the word of God.



Westminster Confession


We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church (***Corporate Reception***) to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof (***Attributes of Canonicity***), are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: *yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof (***How we Know***), is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.*



Attributes of Canonicity

• **Testimony of the Holy Spirit**

- God, in His Sovereign Wisdom, chose to use the person of the Holy Spirit to create His written revelation (2 Peter 1:21; Hebrews 3:7)
- This same Spirit is the one who convinces God's people of God's Word
- Apart from the influence of the Holy Spirit, no human would ever accept any book or written work as canon (John 16:12-16)



John 16:12-16

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.



Attributes of Canonicity

- **Canon is ultimately established by hearing the Voice of our Shepherd!**
 - We have attempted to provide a rational basis for our understanding of canon and to push back against the assertions of critics who seek to discount the biblical canon.
 - However, while these arguments serve to strengthen the confidence we already have in the scriptures, they **CANNOT** create that confidence.
 - Ultimately, acceptance of the canon and the truths of scripture found in it can only be gained through the supernatural work of God in the new creation.

COVENANT THEOLOGY



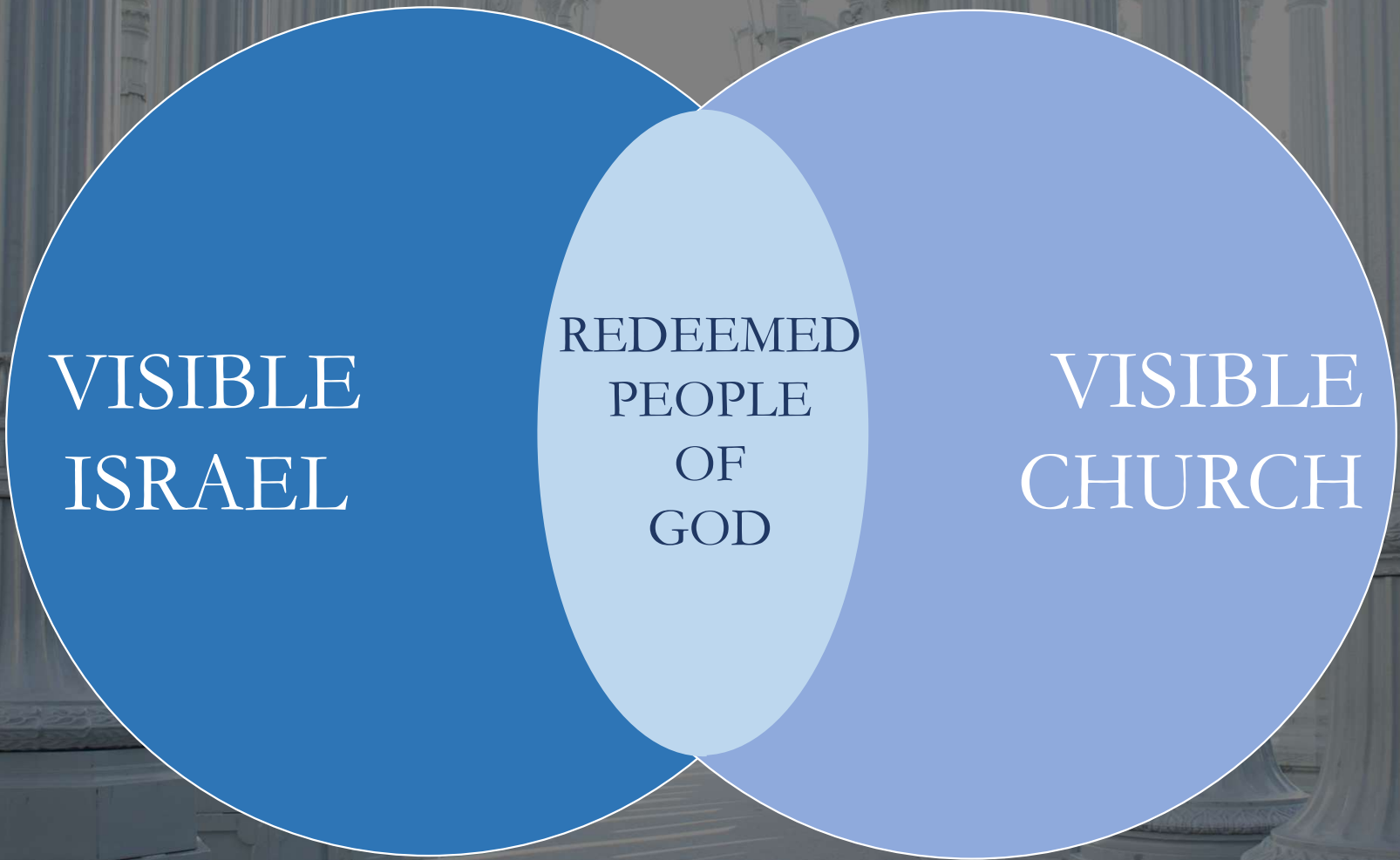
ISRAEL/CHURCH

DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

ISRAEL

CHURCH

PROGRESSIVE
DISPENSATIONAL/COVENANT THEOLOGY

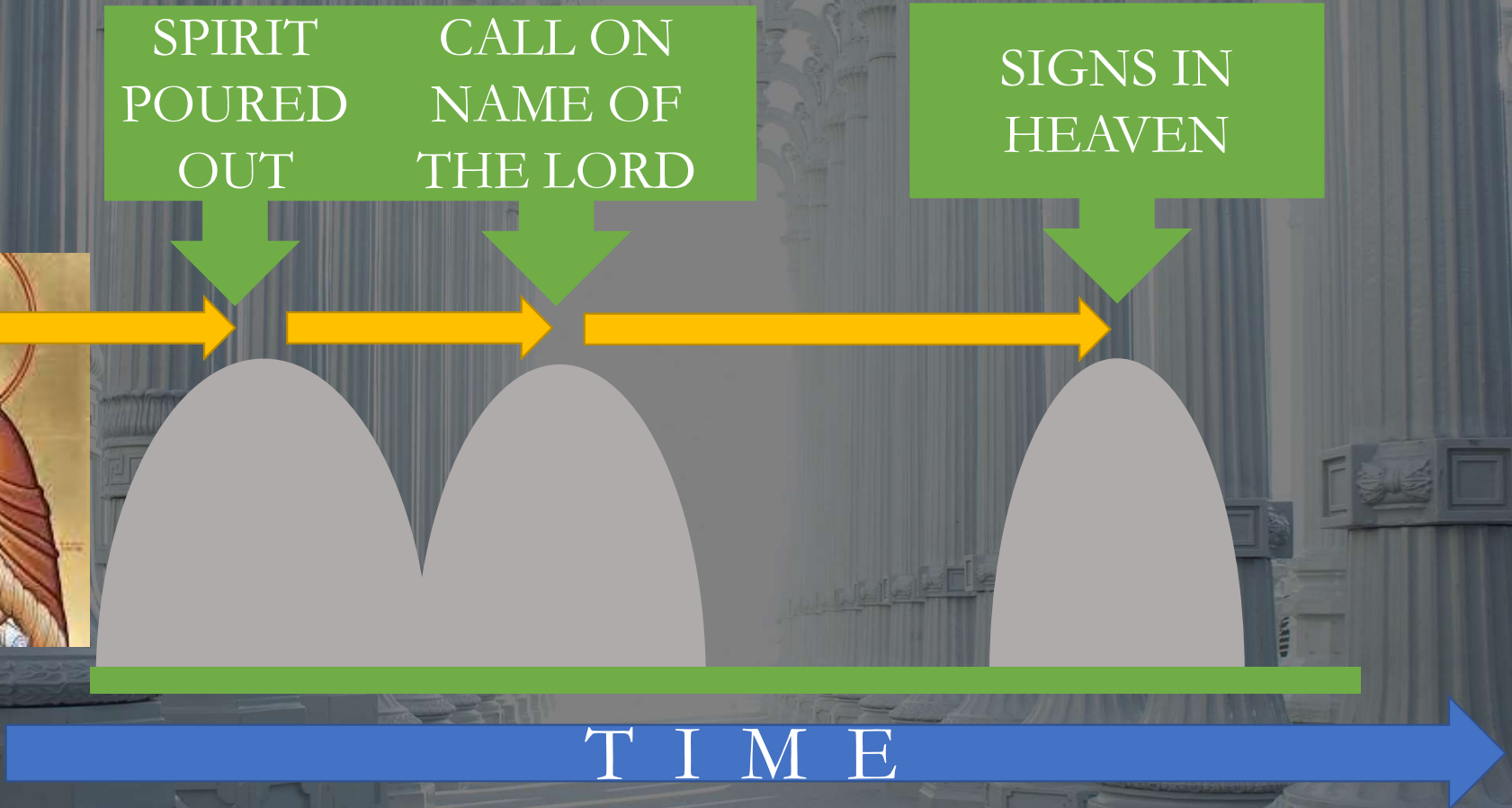


ALREADY/NOT YET APPROACH TO PROPHECY

SPIRIT
POURED
OUT

CALL ON
NAME OF
THE LORD

SIGNS IN
HEAVEN





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