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A REVIEW ARTICLE

Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books

Reviewed by
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Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books, by Michael J. Kruger. Wheaton: Crossway, 2012. 362 pp. $30.00.

Ever since German liberalism began to infect the world of New Testament studies in the latter part of the eighteenth century, conservative scholarship has fought valiantly to defend the authority, historicity, and inerrancy of the Scriptures. This battle has been waged on many fronts including textual criticism, biblical theology, and introduction. In the field of introduction, particularly, conservative scholars have defended first century dates for all of the NT books, and they have argued for the authenticity of the authors of those books while denying the possibility of pseudonymous interlopers. Conservatives have fit themselves well in this skirmish with regard to the dating and authorship of the NT books. But another field related to introduction that has not received as much attention is that of the canon. Michael J. Kruger, President and Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC, is seeking to remedy this dearth in canon studies. While he has written a number of books and articles, *Canon Revisited* is his most important contribution to date.

In Kruger's introductory chapter (15–24) he cites three factors that indicate why a study of the canon should rank high on any pastor's list. First, "modern critical scholarship has continued to raise doubt about the authorship and date of numerous New Testament books" (17). The point, of course, is that if a book is deemed as a forgery, why would it have been included in an authoritative canon? Second, over the last 150 years many apocryphal materials have been discovered such as the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Gospel of Thomas* that have raised questions about the books that should be included in the canon. Third, the continued influence of Walter Bauer's book

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Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity brings into question the legitimacy and authority of the books currently found in our NT canon.

This third point requires a little more explanation for it stands as the basis for why point two has become an issue in modern discussions about the canon. Though many know the name Walter Bauer because of the lexicon he produced (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*), his most significant scholarly contribution was his book *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity.*[2] In this book Bauer argued that early Christianity was characterized by significant doctrinal diversity such that there were a number of *christianities*, each vying for acceptance by the church. The Roman church rose to the forefront between the fourth and sixth centuries A.D. and established the criteria of doctrinal orthodoxy. Thus, heresy preceded orthodoxy, rather than the historically held view that true Christianity preceded heretical teaching in the early church. Bauer's thesis was adopted and developed by many scholars after him, but his view has been recently popularized by Bart Ehrman in a number of books, particularly *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).[3]

What all this means for the subject of the NT canon is that a great deal of suspicion has arisen over the legitimacy and authority of the 27 books in our Bibles. How can we be sure that these are precisely the right books? Are there other early religious texts that deserve to be included? What was the process by which these 27 came to be included? And what are we to make of disputes in the early church over the inclusion of some of these books? These and many more questions arise when the Bauer thesis becomes the lens through which early Christian history is viewed. Thus, Kruger is not only right to pursue a defense of our current NT canon, but his book also merits our attention and affirmation, for its solid arguments are greatly needed in the ongoing struggle to uphold the authority of the Bible.

While there are several roads one could take to legitimate the canon, Kruger addresses the following question in this book: do Christians have adequate grounds for thinking they can know which books are canonical (23)? To answer this question Kruger divides the book into two main sections. In the first section (chapters 1–3), "Determining the Canonical Model," he provides a taxonomy of canonical

[2]Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity,* ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel, trans. Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). The original German edition was published in 1934 with a second edition appearing in 1964. See Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 24–33, for a short biography of Bauer and a description of his book and its influence.

[3]For more explanation about the popularization of the Bauer thesis, see Köstenberger and Kruger, 30–32.

models, explains and critiques each one, and then puts forth a case for adopting the "self-authenticating" model that forms the foundation for the entire book. The second section (chapters 4–8), "Exploring and Defending the Canonical Model," examines some potential defeating arguments leveled against the self-authenticating model by providing positive support for the divine qualities of the books, their apostolic origins, and the historical process by which each of the 27 books came to be recognized by the early Church.

It will be helpful to see the strength of Kruger's argument by looking in detail at each of the two main sections of the volume. Part One answers the important epistemological question related to canon acceptance, e.g., how do we know that these 27 books belong in the NT canon? Put another way, what are the *grounds* or basis of canonicity? There are two basic answers to this question. We can use *extrinsic* criteria to authenticate the books of the canon, or we can look at the books themselves and by virtue of their *intrinsic* qualities come to recognize whether they belong or not. Kruger covers the *extrinsic* approaches in the first two chapters, dividing them into two large categories: *community determined* approaches (chapter 1) that view the canon as something that is established or constituted by people (individually or corporately) and *historically determined* approaches (chapter 2) that investigate the historical merits of the books to see whether or not they contain authentic Jesus tradition or apostolic origins.

Kruger helpfully organizes the *community determined* advocates into four groups: (1) historical-critical; (2) Roman Catholic; (3) canonical criticism; and (4) existential/neo-orthodox. The *historically determined* models include (1) the Canon-within-the-Canon and (2) the Criteria-of-Canonicity models. For each of the six, Kruger provides a description of the group's approach to canon determination. I found his descriptions to be comprehensive, well-documented, and even-handed as he provided clear and faithful summaries of each. Next, he moves to evaluation. He consistently identifies at least one positive point of assessment regarding the particular model he is covering before advancing to the problems he sees with each.

This is not to say that he does not value some approaches more highly than others. His summary of the *community determined* models (66) is spot on: "Largely overlooked in [these] 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. As a result of these omissions, these models are left with a canon that is derived from and established by the church, and thus is unable to rule over the church. In effect, the canon has so much become the church's book that it is unable to be God's book."

Even in chapter 2 where Kruger is more favorably disposed to the *historically determined* models, especially the criteria-of-canonicity

(such notables as Warfield, Harris, and Hodge fit here),[4] he finds them lacking. Why? "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" (87).

Having completed his taxonomy of the *extrinsic* approaches to canonical validation, Kruger moves in chapter 3 to explain the *intrinsic* model. While several scholars from the past including Augustine, Calvin, Turretin, and Bavinck have adopted and explained this canonical model, more recent advocates include Richard Gaffin and especially Herman Ridderbos.[5] The canon as self-authenticating means that "the Scriptures themselves provide grounds for considering external data: the apostolicity of books, the testimony of the church, and so forth" (90). The major objection to the self-authenticating model, of course, is that its advocates argue in a circle. These objectors ask how it is possible to authenticate the canon by appealing to it as the basis for its truth. Indeed, the Bible does not come out and say that the 27 books of the NT belong to the canon. Yet, all truth statements are founded upon some ultimate standard. And this is why the canon as God's Word demands to be a foundational criterion of truth. Scripture is an *ultimate* authority. Kruger asks (91), "How do we offer an account of how we know that an ultimate authority is, in fact, the ultimate authority?" Do we appeal to another authority to validate its position as ultimate? This would be illogical. "Thus, for ultimate authorities to be ultimate authorities, they have to be the standard for their own authentication. You cannot account for them without using them" (91).

Having established the legitimacy of using the Scriptures to authenticate the canon, Kruger shows that the Bible does testify to the fact that God has established the "proper epistemic environment wherein belief in the New Testament canon can be reliably formed" (94). This environment includes three major components: 1) providential exposure (we could not know which books are canonical unless we have access to them); 2) attributes of canonicity (we need to be able to distinguish canonical from non-canonical books, and we do this by applying the attributes of canonicity—divine qualities, corporate reception, and apostolic origins); and 3) internal testimony of the Holy Spirit (there needs to be a proper basis for thinking we can correctly

[4]B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 429; R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 219–35; and A. A. Hodge, *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1869), 51–52.

[5]For bibliographic data, see Kruger, 88–90,

identify these attributes).

Kruger uses the rest of chapter 3 to explain these three components, particularly the attributes of canonicity. Furthermore, he shows how the attributes of canonicity are mutually reinforcing so that they contribute to a balanced definition of canon that includes both exclusive (canon as reception), functional (canon as use), and ontological (canon as divinely given) aspects. His diagram on page 118 helpfully illustrates this three-dimensional model, and he explains the interplay between the attributes of canonicity shown on the diagram in this way: "Any book with apostolic origins is a book constituted by the Holy Spirit and therefore will possess divine qualities. And if a book has divine qualities, then its content must derive from someone who speaks with the authority of God, namely, an apostolic source. And any book with divine qualities and apostolic origins will, through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, impose itself on the church. And any book received by the corporate church must have the divine qualities and apostolic origins that would allow the church to recognize the voice of Christ in it" (290).

There are some potential contrary arguments (called "defeaters" by Kruger) that may bring questions to the legitimacy of the self-authenticating model. And the answers to these "defeaters" are found in Part Two of the book, "Exploring and Defending the Canonical Model."

Chapter 4 deals with apparent disagreements and/or contradictions between New Testament books that might bring into question their divine qualities. If there are inconsistencies between the books, how could they really be from God? In particular Kruger answers the claims of Walter Bauer and F. C. Baur. The former argued that there was no basis of orthodoxy in the early church until after the canon was established. The latter argued that the books of the New Testament represent divergent and contradictory theologies. In sum, an understanding of the divine qualities of the books themselves provides a strong argument in support of the 27 books we currently have in our NT canon. Kruger discusses three categories of divine qualities in the chapter: the beauty and excellency of Scripture, the power and efficacy of Scripture, and the unity and harmony of Scripture. As one might expect, each section is filled with Scripture references as well as supporting statements from the Westminster Confession of Faith and many early church fathers. Kruger reserves the most space in the chapter for his discussion on the unity and harmony of Scripture. Here he discusses the doctrinal unity, redemptive-historical unity, and structural unity of the canon. Yes, there is ample proof from the divine qualities of the NT books themselves to argue for their inclusion in the canon and to defend against the claims of inconsistency or diversity.

Another potential defeater of the attributes of canonicity relates to apostolic authorship. Scholars like Moody Smith, Helmut Koester, Harry Gamble, James Barr, and Lee McDonald (to name a few) argue that the idea of an authoritative NT canon did not enter anyone's

mind until the second century when heretics like Marcion came on the scene. It was at this time, then, that a number of authors, writing in the names of earlier apostles, felt compelled to write with the purpose of defending Christianity. But is this theory of canon production accurate? Kruger argues that it is not. He believes that there was a structural framework for the canon (the covenant), a rationale for the canon (redemption), and agents of the canon (the apostles), whose writings were accepted because they were apostolic and *not* pseudonymous. Especially helpful in this chapter is Kruger's description of the apostolic tradition, the need for recording that tradition in permanent written form, and the reality of apostolic self-awareness in the producing of authoritative documents.

A common error made by the Criteria-of-Canonicity model is that one must provide evidence that all the writers of the NT books were apostles if, indeed, "the principle of canonicity is basically apostolic authorship."[6] Kruger's description of "apostolic" (following Ridderbos)[7] provides a helpful corrective to this overstatement. He shows that a document bears apostolic authority as part of the apostolic tradition if "(1) it was written during the apostolic age (and thus was composed at a time when the apostles were overseeing the transmission of their tradition), and (2) it was written by someone who got his information directly from an apostle" (182).

Chapters 6–8 respond to the defeating arguments made with regard to the corporate reception of the NT books. Critics suggest that any disagreement in the early church with regard to the canonicity of these books would argue against their inclusion. Kruger offers two arguments in response. First, he shows that this defeater only works "if some level of disagreement over canonical books would be *inconsistent* with the predictions of the self-authenticating model" (292). Given the sinful attacks made upon the early church and the realities of God's providential working through normal historical channels, we would expect some level of dissent prior to the reaching of a final consensus by the church. Second, this defeater overplays the level of disagreement and dissent. When we look more closely at the historical evidence, we find that the process was not nearly as erratic as often claimed. "Not only was there a 'core' canon of New Testament books that were well established from a very early time, but disagreements over peripheral canonical books were less problematic than is often portrayed" (292).

Each of the final three chapters develops these two arguments.

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[6]Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, 255; see also his comments on 259, 270. Harris's model requires that he makes some unique and creative declarations such as the idea that Luke was Paul's amanuensis for Luke and Acts; that Mark was Peter's amanuensis for the gospel of Mark; that Jude and James were definitely apostles; and that Hebrews was written by Paul using Barnabas as his amanuensis. Harris's definition of "amanuensis" is stretched well beyond its normal meaning in order to support his view.

[7]Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1988), 32.

Chapter 6 speaks to the emergence of a canonical core as seen in the NT itself, the apostolic fathers, and second century sources (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and the Muratorian Fragment). Chapter 7 dives into the world of ancient manuscripts, showing how these physical remnants of early Christianity support the notion of a canonical core created for the purpose of public reading in corporate worship. Chapter 8 shows how the history of the canon is not nearly as problematic as some suggest. Using Eusebius's categories from the early fourth century, Kruger helpfully explains what he meant by "recognized books," "disputed books," "rejected books," and "heretical books." Noteworthy is the fact that the 27 books of the NT canon comprise the first two categories with only 5 (James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John, and 3 John) considered as "disputed." While the "rejected" books are considered to be orthodox, they were rejected in regard to canonical status though the church fathers did regard these books as useful and beneficial (these included such books as *Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas,* and *Didache*). Kruger's concluding statements in chapter 8 are helpful: "When the individual merits of each book are examined, it quickly becomes clear that the early church had reasons (and quite good ones) for rejecting some and accepting others" (287). "When all the dust had settled, the church had reached an impressive degree of unity about which books it recognized as speaking with the voice of its Master. It is remarkable that such unity is entirely overlooked and dismissed by some models of the canon…. The fact that the church was able to reach such unity in the midst of such diversity would indicate that more was in play than just the random flow of history. Indeed,…the church reached unity on these books precisely because Christ himself was speaking in them" (287).

The concluding chapter provides a clear and concise summary of the volume (288–92), and it culminates with three implications of the self-authenticating model. First, there is more common ground between competing canonical models than is often realized. As Kruger shows throughout the book, the self-authenticating model is three-dimensional in nature. We have a canon in the first century due to its apostolic origins. There is also a sense that we have a canon in the second century as its scriptural quality was increasingly recognized. Finally, there is also a sense that we have a canon in the fourth century when the widespread consensus of the church was achieved. As Kruger helpfully asserts, the "canon is a complex and multidimensional concept that cannot be artificially flattened out. Canon has an ecclesiological dimension, a historical dimension, and an aesthetic/internal dimension. It is when a single aspect of canon is absolutized at the expense of the others that distortions inevitably arise" (293).

Kruger gives a second implication: the decisive issue in canonical studies is one's ontology of canon. The self-authenticating model is set apart from all other models of canon because "it recognizes not only that the books of the canon have divine authority apart from their reception by the community of faith, but also that this authority can be

known *through the books themselves* as the power of the Spirit works within them" (294). This is why the canon at its core is a *theological* issue. Certainly, there are *historical* and *ecclesiastical* aspects as well, but these, too, are based upon the main theological concern. Again, Kruger correctly states, "The manner in which one authenticates canon is integrally connected to one's view about the kind of books being authenticated." This is why a belief in the divine authority of the books due to the fact that they have been inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16) must be the starting point for establishing a canonical model.

A third implication is that Christians do have intellectually sufficient grounds for claiming to know which books belong in the New Testament. They are not grasping at straws when they claim to have rational and reasonable belief in regard to the canon. Kruger uses a quotation from Ernest Best as a foil to the conclusion he is making. Best wrote, "No one has come up with a satisfactory solution as to how we determine which books should be in the canon."[8] Kruger disagrees. He believes that Christians throughout the ages have known and been assured of the 27 books of the NT canon. How? The church has always relied upon something "very old." "The solution to the problem of canon has not been lacking—it has actually been there the whole time. Jesus himself declared it: 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me' (John 10:27)."

I greatly appreciate the gift that Michael Kruger has given to the church with this volume. What he accomplishes in a little less than 300 pages is an incredible testimony to compact and clear prose, detailed and comprehensive scholarship (he provides a bibliography of 49 pages), logical and fair-handed argumentation, and faithful and warmhearted application.

It seems trivial to bring up a minor point that I found plausible but unconvincing. But in the interests of full disclosure I must mention it. When speaking of the covenantal structure of the two testaments (150–52), Kruger suggests that the covenantal concept drives the organization of the canon (e.g., the Epistles parallel the Prophets in that both function as "covenant lawsuits" against the people of God who have rejected the stipulations of the covenant). Such efforts to connect covenantal concepts with the structure of the NT canon appear far-fetched. Later in the book, when Kruger speaks about the connection between the old and new covenants (testaments) with regard to the need for a written text to testify to the terms of the new arrangement (162–66), his argument is more defensible.

This small matter aside, I highly recommend this book for all conservative Christians who value the authority and inspiration of God's Word. This is the best book on the defense of the NT canon to date. Since it is not written in overly technical language, it is readily accessible to the person in the pew as well as to the seminarian, pastor, and

[8]Ernest Best, "Scripture, Tradition, and the Canon of the New Testament," *BJRL* 61 (1979): 282.

professor. Conservative Christians do, indeed, have justifiable reasons for believing in the truth of Scripture and in the books that make up the canon of Scripture. *Canon Revisited* provides the apologetic and theological tools needed in the defense and proclamation of the Gospel as deposited in our Bibles.