

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

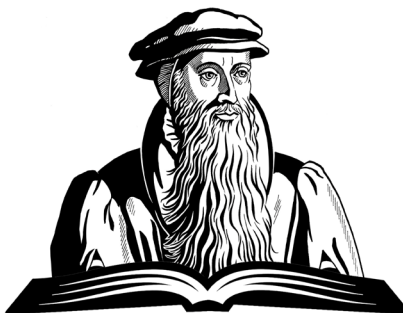
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 1:

INTRODUCTION and THE DOCTRINE OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

Lecture 7

THE CANON OF HOLY SCRIPTURE



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 7

Introduction:

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Module 1 ~ Lecture 7

THE CANON OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Many of you will have visited a library at some point, whether big or small. Some of you may even have a small selection of books that you have collected in your home. Libraries serve as a depository of written literature. We find them all over the world, in universities and schools, local communities, and private homes. Ordinarily, the books in larger libraries are organized according to subjects, and then arranged in order after the names of the authors. A visitor can explore the stacks, scanning the shelves for volumes that would prove useful for what they desire to research or investigate.

When we think about the Bible, we usually think of it as one large book, and that is obviously true. But in another sense, it is also a small library comprised of 66 different books written by various human authors with diverse backgrounds over the course of many centuries, all of which are inspired by God Himself, the ultimate author of every word.

In this lecture, we will consider the canon of Holy Scripture. Now the word “canon” comes from a Greek word that referred to a straight rod used for measuring. This rod served as a standard or norm. The word was then applied to the Holy Scriptures, which are the inspired standard or authoritative rule for faith and practice in all ages. So when we say canon, we mean the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament. These 66 books of the Bible, no more and no fewer, comprise what we call the canon of Holy Scripture.

At the time of the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, the people of God possessed a complete collection of the Old Testament Scriptures. Both Christ and the apostles recognized their divine authority and read them, studied them, memorized them, and frequently cited them accordingly. During the time of the apostles, the process of collecting the New Testament Scriptures began immediately. Paul, of course, knew that his writings were inspired, which is why he writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:27, “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read until all the holy brethren.” And he also says in Colossians 4:16, “And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans.” Likewise, Peter refers to the writings of Paul as holy “scripture” in 2 Peter 3:15–16. As the God-given books of the New Testament were being widely distributed, problems arose, and this was due to heretics rejecting some of the New Testament books, and other false teachers promoting uninspired books of merely human composition. To combat these errors, the Church found it necessary to meet by council to declare what is recognized as the exact content of the New Testament for the edification of God’s people.

We continue in this first module on systematic theology covering the doctrine of first principles with special attention on the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures. In the previous lecture, we considered

some of the properties of Scripture that flow from its inspiration. Those properties serve as a foundation now for our consideration of the canonicity of Scripture. As in our other lectures, we will look at the doctrine of canonicity—scripturally, doctrinally, polemically, and practically.

So first of all, we'll consider it scripturally. In Romans 3:1, Paul asks the question, "What advantage then hath the Jew?" "What advantage then hath the Jew?" Now, if you were asked that question, how would you answer it? What privileges did the people of God have under the Old Testament? More specifically, if you had to limit yourself to one, what chief advantage would you highlight? Well, Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, supplies the answer in verse 2. He says, "Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God." Oracles are divine sayings, utterances, originating from God. These oracles of God, as he calls them, refer to the Old Testament Scriptures. The source or origin of them is God, as we saw in the lecture on inspiration. But God, having supplied the Scriptures, also committed this divine revelation unto people. Well, what people? Specifically, the Lord committed them unto the church, the people of God, who were to recognize the divine authority of the Scriptures and to receive them, believe them, and hold fast to them. It was their chief advantage, or privilege, to have the Word of God. It would, of course, be no advantage if God supplied the Scriptures and His people failed to recognize or receive them. God's intention is for the Church to have His complete revelation and to have complete confidence in those Scriptures as the very word of God, their only rule for faith and practice. So Paul's words in Romans 3:1–2, therefore, establish our expectations for recognizing and receiving God's written Word that is committed unto us, and it thereby introduces to us the concept of the canonicity of Holy Scripture.

Secondly, we need to consider a doctrinal overview of the canonicity of Scripture, and here we will expound some of the more detailed distinctions and categories that the Bible provides for us. But first of all, let's hear how the Westminster Confession speaks of this. In chapter 1, paragraph 2, we read, "Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all of the books of the Old Testament and New Testament, which are these," and then it goes on in that first chapter to list off all 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament. So this recognizes the parameters of the Bible as consisting of 66 books, no more or less. So there's a summary statement in the Westminster Confession.

Now, we explored in the previous lecture the divine authority of Scripture. Let me remind you how the Confession speaks of this in chapter 1, paragraph 4. It says, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God." The nature of the canon must be distinguished from the recognition of the canon. In other words, the canon is inherently authoritative. The recognition of the canon by men or the church does not make it authoritative. Now that is true because only God is adequate to witness to Himself, as we see in John 5:38–39, for example.

That leads us to the most fundamental and important point regarding canonicity, which is this: the canon is self-authenticating. So the canon is proved authentic, genuine, and authoritative from itself. This point is reinforced by the material that we covered in a previous lecture on the self-testing nature of Scripture. The believer is brought to recognize the divine authority of the books of the Bible with the aid of the witness of the Spirit, but those books are authoritative whether men recognize it or not.

Furthermore, the self-authenticating nature of the New Testament canon is reinforced by further criteria, and that includes apostolicity; that is, each book had to be written by or under an

apostle. Well, why do we believe this? Well, because Christ promised to use the apostles to supply Scripture. You think toward the end of his ministry, for example, in John 14 and in John 16, we see Him speaking about this. And that is manifest, for example, in John 21:24; John is writing, and he says, “This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true.” Paul confirms this in places like Ephesians 3:5 when he says, “Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Holy Spirit.” The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, as we see in Ephesians 2:20, because those divinely-appointed offices, apostle and prophet, were given by God to provide us with the completion of the canon, with the remaining New Testament books. That gives us the foundation upon which the church is built. And this is why it was so important that there was a confirmation that the New Testament books were actually written by apostles, the ones claiming to be writing. Which is why Paul says, for example, in 2 Thessalonians 3:17, “The salutation of Paul with mine own hand,” which is the token in every epistle—“so I write.” What is he doing? He’s confirming to the church in Thessalonica that this is indeed an epistle that had been written by him, because they understood, just as he understood, and the church generally, that it was the apostles that God would use to inspire them in writing Holy Scripture for the provision of the church.

But there’s more. The self-authenticating nature of the New Testament canon is also reinforced by its contents, its internal contents. The New Testament books are, of course, self-consistent, and agree with the teaching of other portions of the Bible, and are of the same high spiritual character as we see in the Bible as a whole. We have numerous examples throughout the New Testament of the confirmation of this within the books themselves. So you think, for example, of the last book of the New Testament and its first verse. Revelation 1:1 says, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his Angel unto his servant John.” Well, that has all the characteristics of what we’ve been describing within the contents of the book itself. And that same book, the book of Revelation, ends with these words, in Revelation 22:18–19, “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” The Lord is saying we are not to add to or take away from anything that He has provided through His apostles. So you see these indicators within the content of Scripture itself. Now, there are many examples that could be given. A few others include 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:14, 1 Corinthians 2:12–13 as well as 14:37, we could list many, many, many others.

Furthermore, the self-authenticating nature of the New Testament canon further explains its universal reception by the church. So, think back to what we said at the beginning of this lecture. As we saw in Romans 3:2, God committed the Scriptures to a community designed to receive them, namely, the church, and so they must be accepted by the church as a whole. This was true of the New Testament saints and their view of the Old Testament. Paul refers to the Old Testament as Holy “Scripture.” Our Lord does the same in the Gospels. He speaks of Timothy being raised and taught the Holy “Scriptures” from the time of his youth, referring to the Old Testament. This is the testimony, of course, of the New Testament with regards to the rest of the New Testament as well. And there are many, many examples of some portions of the New Testament referring to other portions of the New Testament as Scripture. In 2 Peter 3:3, you have a passage of Scripture given to

us, and then that passage is actually quoted later on by Jude. You can look at 2 Peter 3:16 as well; turn to Jude verses 17 and 18 for comparison here. Many examples of this can be given. Indeed, it would be a helpful and edifying study for you to compile a list of these. But this explains why the canon was historically settled in God's providence, with the church as a whole recognizing the inspired New Testament Scriptures. It had to be so. God gave those 27 books in the New Testament to His church. They had to receive them and recognize them, universally, as the people of God. And that, of course, is exactly what has unfolded, as I say, in God's providence.

So we have some of the components of the biblical principles that contribute to our understanding of the doctrine of the canon. We recognize, first of all, that it is self-authenticating; that it is deemed authentic, or genuine, and authoritative from itself. And that's born out in the apostolic witness and it's borne out in the contents of the New Testament books, and in the fact that they're received by the people of God.

But that doesn't mean that everyone agrees with this. And so thirdly, we need to consider and answer some of the primary arguments which attack the canonicity of Holy Scripture. This is the polemical consideration of the doctrine, and this will ensure that we are equipped to refute these errors and to hold fast to the truth of Scripture.

Well, the first thing that we need to consider is the difference between the Roman Catholic doctrine and the biblical and Protestant doctrine. So within Roman Catholicism, they maintain a dual authority: the church has authority with all of its traditions, and Scripture has authority and they are co-equal. Indeed, even worse than that, their making them or alleging that they're co-equal, ends up exalting the church and the traditions of the church above the Bible. The Protestants, on the other hand, hold to the doctrine of Scripture alone, that the Bible alone is the standard for faith and practice; that it alone has divine authority; that everything is to be subjected to Scripture and tested by the Word of God.

So how does this affect the doctrine of canonicity? Well, the Roman Catholics will come and say that they are the Church that gave you the Bible. You can understand the idea here—they see the church as being in a position of authority, and they're the ones giving you the Bible. Well, Protestants, on the other hand, say, no, the church recognized the self-authenticated canon, but the church did not create that canon. In other words, the Bible comes first, then the church, which is actually born out of the Bible. Similarly, the Roman Catholics will say that the church is the mother of Scripture—you know, the picture is of the mother giving birth to the Scripture, again exalting the church above the Bible. Whereas Protestants and the Bible itself teach us that the church is the servant of the Bible, not over it but under it; that we are the servants of Holy Scripture.

The Roman Catholics teach that the church has infallible interpretation. So the church is to tell you what the Bible says and what the Bible means, and they therefore exercise that authority. And so there have been times in history when they've said, "We can't even give the people in the pew, the people of God, the Bible because they'll make a mess of things, right? We need to tell them what they're to think about what the Bible says." You can see how this flows out of exalting the authority of the church over the Bible. Well, the biblical doctrine that Protestants hold is that there is no private interpretation. So 2 Peter 1:20–21, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man"—see there, it's not the church that's originated it in their own self, "but," it says, "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." And so the first area in considering this polemically is being able to recognize the errors of the Roman Catholic Church in exalting the church over the authority of the Bible.

But there's a second one that we can consider and that is the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha provides a helpful test case of the marks of canonicity. Now when I say "Apocrypha," or the "Apocryphal books," we're referring to the collection of books that is found in between the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament Scriptures, within Roman Catholic Bibles. So where did these come from? The Apocryphal books were written after the Old Testament was completed, so after the prophecy of Malachi. And during that four hundred years intervening, these books came about—they were produced, and then we come of course to the Gospels, and then we have the New Testament Scripture. So this middle collection of books which Roman Catholics have in their Bible is referred to as the Apocrypha. Now what does the Westminster Confession say about this? In chapter 1, paragraph 3, it says, "The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, or to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, then other human writings." So that's the summary of what Protestants believe regarding the Apocrypha.

Now, let's think back through the doctrines that we were reflecting on under the second point and test the Apocrypha by that biblical standard. Well, first of all, we have to conclude that the Apocrypha is not self-authenticating, and that's going to be born out in what follows; nor is it confirmed by the witness of the Spirit. Notice some of the details. So for example, the Apocrypha was not authored by prophets or apostles. Now we saw that was one of the criteria—the Old Testament Scriptures given by prophets, the New Testament given by apostles and prophets as well. Well, those books are not authored by prophets and apostles, which means they fail to meet the criteria that the Bible itself provides for us.

Secondly, in reading through the Apocryphal books, you notice how contradictory they are. They're contradictory to themselves, but more importantly, contradictory at points to doctrines and truths taught elsewhere in the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, there are parts of the Apocrypha that are pure fiction—that are fictional. So the contents, the standard that the Bible gives us regarding the contents, also cause the Apocrypha to fail the test.

And then lastly, the Apocrypha was not universally received by the church. Indeed, the Jews did not accept them as Scriptures, the apostles did not quote them, and the early church did not receive them in those first few centuries. So the Apocrypha fails to meet the standards of canonicity. Here we have another example of the use of the doctrine of canonicity polemically.

But fourthly and lastly, we need to consider this practically. Considering the canon of Scripture, we can highlight some practical implications for ourselves, just a few. So this doctrine of canonicity leads to a high and holy esteem of the Scriptures. The Bible, and only the Bible, provides the authoritative standard for even itself. That's what we mean by the self-authenticating nature of the canon. God alone can speak for Himself. Think of the words of Daniel 4:35, "And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest thou?" And so this doctrine of canonicity gives us a high and holy esteem for the Scriptures.

Secondly, we have a Holy Bible, one that is set apart from all other books and of perfect purity. We must take care, then, to resist adding to it or taking away from these 66 books of the Bible. We read in Deuteronomy 12:32, "What things soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." This is very similar to what we saw earlier in that quotation from the end of Revelation chapter 22. In other words, we must fear God. Isaiah 66:2 says, "But to this man will I look even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at my word." This is descriptive of the fear of God, of handling the Bible as a holy word that He has given to

us. And we should be jealous about preserving it, not allowing people to tinker with it by adding or subtracting from it.

Thirdly, understanding the doctrine of canonicity cultivates confidence in the Word of God. The believer can be certain—absolutely certain—that their Bibles provide the divine revelation that God has committed to His church for their spiritual edification. Now there will be many unbelievers who will come and question this, and will say, “Well, there were lots of books that were written in the first century, and how do we know? Maybe we’ve got the books wrong; maybe there are ones that should be included that aren’t, and others that shouldn’t be included.” And there’s all sorts of confusion, and this can have a tendency in some believers in taking away, as it were, their confidence, or shaking their confidence in the Scripture. So our study of the doctrine of canonicity addresses that, right? It sends our roots down into the Scriptures themselves, solidifying in our own hearts and minds the fact that this Holy Bible with its 66 books is indeed the complete and perfect canon of Holy Scripture.

Well, in this lecture, we considered the canonicity of the Scriptures—that the Bible is comprised exclusively of 66 inspired books, 39 in the Old Testament, 27 in the New Testament. In the next lecture, we will consider the preservation of the canon, as well as the biblical principles which control the translation of the Scriptures into various languages.