



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

Michael J. Kruger

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This study of the New Testament canon and its authority looks deeper than the traditional surveys of councils and creeds, mining the biblical text itself for direction in understanding what the original authors and audiences believed the canon to be. *Canon Revisited* distinguishes itself by placing a substantial focus on the *theology of canon* as the context within which the historical evidence is evaluated and assessed. In effect, this work successfully unites both the theology and the historical development of the canon, ultimately serving as a practical defense for the authority of the New Testament books.

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

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Author : Michael J. Kruger

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Testament Books Michael J. Kruger**

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Robin says

In the first section of this book, Kruger argues that many of the common ways of understanding the creation of the canon - for example, it being either community-determined or historically determined - are inadequate due to their placing of some external source of authority over the canon, which is then believed to itself have ultimate authority. Instead, Kruger argues, we need to use a self-authenticating model, as all forms of ultimate authority are inherently self-authenticating. This is a view that requires a lot of nuance, as Kruger argues that, for example, community determination and historical determination are still important elements in determination of the canon, even if it is ultimately self-authenticating. The idea is conceptually challenging at times, though Kruger does make some compelling arguments.

However, for much of the book, I found myself wanting to see his approach in action. Early on, after outlining what the self-referential model looks like, Kruger gives a very brief summary of how the model could be applied to the book of 1 John. While this is mildly helpful, 1 John is a book that was never in doubt in terms of inclusion in the canon. I wanted to see how it applied to books that were on both sides of the fringes.

I was excited then to see that the final chapter of the book was to deal with the "problem books on the canonical boundaries." But unfortunately, this chapter seemed to somewhat pull the rug out from under the rest of the book. For each book discussed, the explanation of why that book was or was not included in the canon basically covered how many of the early church fathers accepted it as canonical, when it was presumed to have been written, and whether it had ties to apostolic authority. In other words, the criteria sounded an awful lot like the community-determined and historically determined models. At that point, the reader is left to wonder whether the self-referential model is really something new and tenable, or if deep down it's just a bit of academic tomayto/tomahto.

Nevertheless, regardless of what one concludes about the self-referential model, there is plenty of food for thought and helpful historical information in this book.

David says

Definitely a challenge. This book isn't for the faint of heart. Extremely deep, and several points I had to read multiple times to really understand. All in all, though, it's a thorough defense of the New Testament. I would potentially recommend other books as more of an introduction to the topic before this one, however.

James says

How did the New Testament Canon come to be and why should we regard it as authoritative? My own denomination has historically affirmed scripture as 'the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine and conduct,' but is this position defensible? Where does biblical authority rest if the canon was decided upon by the church.

Michael Kruger, professor of New Testament and academic dean at Reformed Theological Seminary, has written a lucid and helpful examination of issues surrounding the formation of the canon and argues convincingly for a self authenticating model of the New Testament canon. Kruger is remarkably gregarious in his approach, often affirming the good in the models he opposes while trying to establish a model of canon which is both faithful to scripture and tradition and can stand up to critical scrutiny. If you read one book about canon formation this year, this book should be it.

The book is organized into two parts. In part one, Kruger presents and evaluates various approaches to Canon formation. In chapter one he critiques ‘community determined models’ which argue that the basis of a book’s canonicity is solely determined by the book’s recipients (the church or faith community). Of course there are a wide range of community determined approaches: historical-critical, Roman Catholic, Canonical criticism, and Existential/Neo Orthodox. Because of the range of approaches and brevity of Kruger’s treatment, he runs the risk of oversimplifying but is generally fair and well documented in his treatment of each model (even separating out the strand of Roman Catholic teaching which seems to affirm his self-authenticating approach from the strand which places the authority of scripture as subservient to the authority of church). In Chapter 2 he critiques the historically determined models (canon within a canon, or criteria for canonicity model) which argue that the historic, apostolic origin of the books in question are the sole basis for their place in the New Testament. Over and against these approaches Kruger presents the Self-Authenticating model (chapter 3) but he draws generously on the insights from both the community and historic models. His self authenticating model has three features:

Providential exposure (only the books the church has or have been exposed to can be considered for canonization)

Attributes of Canonization (the New Testament books have a ‘divine quality,’ they are received corporately and affirmed by the church at large and they have apostolic origins).

The internal testimony of the Holy Spirit confirms the authority of a book and its place in the canon for believers.

In part 2, Kruger looks more in depth at the attributes of canon (second in the series above) in order to articulate more fully what he means by each and answer particular ‘defeaters’—scholarly arguments against each of these elements. This gives part 2 of the book a sort of apologetic feel (obviously you need to account for counter arguments in all academic discourse but Kruger places himself firmly on confessional grounds). In articulating the divine attributes of Scripture, Kruger points to the beauty and excellence, the power and efficacy and the unity and harmony of scripture. By beauty and excellence, he isn’t referring to literary style or rhetorical flare but the manner that the Bible puts forward the beauty and excellence of Christ. The divine stamp is further evidenced in the power of scripture as a means of grace for people and providing authority in action. God is also seen in the Divine unity of scripture, doctrinally, in articulating the whole redemptive story, and structurally. This doesn’t mean that each book does not have their own peculiar emphasis and distinctives but that together they present a full picture of who God is and what he is doing in our world. In articulating the apostolic authorship and the reception of the canon Kruger sets up a rationale for trusting the authority of the canon and is able to demonstrate that those who question the canon, have not removed all rational basis for believing in it.

On the whole, this is a carefully reasoned and accessible presentation of issues surrounding the Canon. I think Kruger does a very good job of articulating his case and I am in substantial agreement with him. In an era where the authority and truthfulness of the New Testament is often questioned, a book like this provides a powerful apologetic. I highly recommend this book, particularly for students and ministers who are faced with questions and are looking for solid answers for why we trust our Bible and not every other unearthed gospel.

Thank you to Crossway books for providing me with a copy of this book in exchange for this review.

Lynn Joshua says

"How can we know what books belong in the N. T. canon?" This is the question Kruger answers. He starts by showing how the main models can be classified as either community determined or historically determined. In these models, either the community (the church) or the historical data (the dates of the books and their authorship) determine which books should or should not be part of the canon, thus showing that "they all ground the authority of the canon in something outside the canon itself."

Kruger's argument is very much a Van-Tillian approach. As he says, the Word of God cannot be judged by external criteria but is to be assessed on its own self-authenticating claims.

Kroger explains the three components of his "self-authenticating" approach: Providential exposure - The books must have been available to the church. Attributes of Canonization - the New Testament books have a 'divine quality', are affirmed by the church at large, and have apostolic origins. The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit - confirms the authority of a book and its place in the canon for believers.

Dr. Kruger has a charitable tone, and even though this is a scholarly book with abundant footnotes, he has an easy-to-read writing style, and does a great job of explaining the philosophical and theological problems with any other approach.

"The canon, as God's Word, is not just true, but the criterion of truth. It is an ultimate authority. So, how do we offer an account of how we know that an ultimate authority is, in fact, the ultimate authority? If we try to validate an ultimate authority by appealing to some other authority, then we have just shown that it is not really the ultimate authority. 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." -pg. 91, Canon Revisited

Nathan Leopard says

This is a phenomenal book. It has easily become my go to suggestion for anyone who has questions concerning the canon of the New Testament.

Nate Claiborne says

As I said a while back, this was one of my favorite books I've read so far this year. Part of this is the triperspectival approach, but even that is in the background throughout the book. Kruger's work helped to answer questions I have had brought to me over the past six months about the canon of the New Testament, and this is now my go-to book for that subject. I would hope that it gets the scholarly attention that it deserves and that it is widely read among evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike.

Read the full review on my blog

SH Chong says

The book does not aim to prove the truth of the Canon in a Cartesian sense, but rather demonstrate that there is sufficient intellectual basis for the Christian belief in the 27 books of the New Testament. It need not be taken on blind faith.

This books has strengthened my faith.

Aaron Carpenter says

Look, it is simply impossible to convince the skeptic of a divine reality, and any attempts to prove the truth of Scripture to the doubting mind will fail just as surely as Atticus Finch's attempt to prove Tom Robinson's innocence to a Maycomb jury.

BUT that is not the same thing as saying that Christians have no reason to believe that 27 books of the New Testament are God's inspired word. True, many attempts to show this fail because they attempt to base canonicity on some external, ad hoc standard. Which is why Kruger offers a model he calls "Self-authenticating."

Though it sounds like circular reasoning, Kruger shows why the self-authenticating model is the most defensible presentation of any Christian understanding of canon. Simply put, the self-authenticating model looks to Scripture to define the marks of canonicity. This doesn't mean that Scripture is inspired simply because it says so; instead it means that Scripture defines what should be considered Scripture. In other words, Scripture points to the fact that God's people can recognize His Word due to providential exposure to it, attributes of canonicity themselves (divine qualities, corporate reception, and apostolic origin), and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit among true believers.

After slowly presenting this three-dimensional model, Kruger then patiently address potential "defeater" arguments. In particular, he refutes the notion that there were multiple Christianities vying for primacy, demonstrates early recognition of apostolic authorship, and shows how even though we would expect some disagreement among early Christians regarding which books were truly canonical, the most surprising thing is the degree of unity they had long before any 4th century council.

All this is to show that the Christian Scriptures were not the byproduct of some church council or political intrigue but rather the actual historical outworking of Jesus' own words, when he said that his sheep would recognize the voice of their Shepherd.

Brian Collins says

The canon is an inherently difficult topic because it reaches down to the foundations of Christian authority. To ask the Christian to justify his belief that the 27 books and only the 27 books of his New Testament are God's new covenant revelation is akin to asking the rationalist to justify his rationalism or the empiricist to justify his empiricism. Canonicity has become even more complicated today with claims that a New Testament canon was not conceived until centuries after Christ and with assertions that various Gnostic or otherwise unorthodox texts have just as much a claim to represent authentic Christianity as the books of the New Testament.

Michael Kruger enters this discussion with a specific aim. This book is not an apologetic designed to win over the skeptic. He is instead seeking to provide the Christian with a model that can show his embrace of

the New Testament canon is epistemically justified.

Kruger begins by surveying and evaluating three broad approaches to determining the canon: (1) "community determined," (2) "historically determined," and (3) "self-authenticating."

Within these broad categories are found several diverse models. For instance, the Roman Catholic model, the historical-critical model, and Childs's canon-criticism are all "community determined" despite the great differences between them. Historically, orthodox Protestants from the Reformation onward have eschewed the "community determined" approach, though Craig Allert has recently attempted to popularize it among evangelicals. Many of the current challenges to the traditional canon come from models in this category. In this chapter Kruger evaluates each model individually, but his basic overall critique is that "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" (66).

The second broad approach, "historically determined," is more familiar to evangelicals. Contained under this category is the "criteria-of-canonicity" model advocated by the Princetonians and many modern evangelicals. In this model religiously neutral historical investigation seeks to establish that the books of the canon match such criteria as apostolicity, antiquity, and orthodoxy. Kruger doubts, however, that Christians should approach theological questions with studied historical neutrality. He notes, "to authenticate the canon on the basis of a supposedly independent, neutral standard ultimately subjects the canon to an authority outside itself. It allows autonomous human assessment of historical evidence to become an external authority over God's Word" (79-80). Kruger also notes three problems with the criteria themselves. First, there is no evidence that the early Christians did any choosing of which books were and were not canonical based on the proposed criteria. They received, rather than chose, the canonical books. Second, even if the early church did use the various proposed criteria, one must establish that they used the correct criteria. Third, it is not clear that criteria such as apostolicity can be established by neutral historical work.

Kruger argues that the canon is self-authenticating. He is not arguing for a subjective, fideistic approach to the canon. He will, in fact, incorporate the strengths of both the community and historically-determined models into his own. Rather Kruger is advocating an approach that is already found in Calvin, Turretin, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Reformers and their heirs argued for canonicity on the basis of divine qualities found in the canonical books themselves. Kruger makes this one plank of his model. However, he also says that that the canon itself gives other criteria. Because the testimony of the Spirit to the voice of the Lord is corporate and not merely individual, the reception of books by the church is another plank in Kruger's model. Also, since the New Testament gives a foundational role to the apostles and their teaching, apostolicity forms the third plank. In Kruger's model the Holy Spirit testifies to the authenticity of the canon by enabling the church to see its divine qualities, its apostolic origins, and the confirming reception by the church throughout history.

In the remainder of the book, Kruger explains and defends these three planks. For instance, he includes a chapter in which he defines and defends the internal divine qualities of the Scriptural books. He has a chapter on apostolicity in which, among other things, he demonstrates from Scripture that the apostolic writers knew they were writing Scripture. He spends most of his time (three chapters) on the third plank, community reception, since this is where most of the current debate takes place. Kruger effectively challenges the late canon views of men such as Lee Martin McDonald. He also helpfully discusses what may be termed "problem books"—books whose canonicity was not immediately and universally recognized.

Kruger has done an excellent job updating and extending the classic Protestant approach to canonicity in light of present day challenges. This is now the best book on the canon available.

Lucas Bradburn says

Very well done! This is a great resource demonstrating that Christians are intellectually justified when they claim that the NT canon is complete. I learned a great deal from it and feel more confident about my trust in the authority and validity of the canon. Overall, Kruger's approach-- starting with the presupposition that the NT is "self-authenticating"-- is worth the price of the book. Truly Christ's "sheep" throughout the centuries have heard His voice in the NT and have learned to follow Him as a result (John 10:27).

David says

The question regarding Scripture today, among others, is this: Which books belong in the Bible, and why did the ones that are in the Bible get there? This is a significant discussion, of course, because if James Barr is right (The decision to collect a group of chosen books and form a "Scripture," are all human decisions), then the Bible is not the inspired word of God, it is simply a book that endured and has only value as an old and venerable book. As others have argued, it is not a matter of what is the word of God, it is a matter of which "traditions" won! When I was in seminary, this subject was a matter of my master's thesis.

While I am still reading, Kruger legitimately answers these challenges to the questions and sets the NT canon up as the authoritative word of God. Stay tuned!

Jeff Short says

Kruger has given us an excellent treatment of the subject of canon. He evaluates various canonical models, and seems to treat each fairly. He ultimately makes the case for the self-authenticating model of canon. He also gives serious considerations to objection to this model, as well. This is not a book trying to prove the existence of a canon to skeptics. Kruger is rather investigating whether there are sufficient reasons to acknowledge a complete canon of Scriptures. Though not a work of apologetics *per se*, Kruger also makes a case for presuppositionalism more generally. This shouldn't surprise us because there is always a degree of circularity when dealing with ultimate questions, e.g., authority, reality, epistemology, etc.

While exploring the self-authenticating model, he also gives an introductory primer on the relationships between Scripture, Apostles, Holy Spirit, and churches. I enjoyed this book on various levels. This is a book that pastors and preachers ought to read and keep a copy around for reference.

Mark Jr. says

For many years I have felt that canon was my Achilles' Heel as a Protestant (wannabe) theologian. I felt the sting of the charge that I am a "fideist"—someone who chooses his authority arbitrarily, with no sound evidence to back it up. And I felt that sting because it's one thing to make the Bible your authority and another to prove to a skeptic, even a "Christian" one, that these 66 books and no others are divinely authoritative. Where does the Bible itself ever present the final list of canonical books?

Michael Kruger's Canon Revisited has shod my feet with armor; now my heel feels much safer! His work is truly a tour de force, and I don't toss out French appellations easily. What Kruger does is simple: he takes the

theological and epistemological insights of presuppositionalism, an apologetic methodology which resolutely presses back to the Bible, and applies them to the question of canon.

You can hear the presuppositionalism in some of his opening words describing his work:

This volume is not attempting somehow to "prove" the truth of the canon to the skeptic in a manner that would be persuasive to him. Our goal here is not to find some neutral common ground from which we can demonstrate to the biblical critic that these books are divinely given.... The issue that concerns us here is not about our having knowledge of the canon (or proving the truth of canon) but accounting for our knowledge of canon. (21)

Kruger is eager to let the Bible speak in its own defense:

Most prior studies of the canon have provided precious little by way of the theology of canon and have focused almost exclusively on historical questions.... The theology of 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 to be investigated in the first place. (24)

I won't go into great detail, but I'll note that Kruger helpfully describes three major Christian models for understanding canon:

The canon as community determined—this would include the Catholic model in which the church validates and therefore stands over Scripture, but it would also include the neo-orthodox model in which people experience God's authority individually and existentially through encounters with the Bible.

The canon as historically determined—this would be both the liberal Protestant model and the evidentialist model. We know what the books of the Bible are because they're the books that became the Bible, historically speaking (liberal Protestants) or because of all the objective evidence to which we can point for proving that they belong there (evidentialists).

The canon as self-authenticating—this is the model Kruger propounds. And what a great title for this chapter: "My sheep hear my voice." Kruger points out that the previous two models (and all those contained within those two broad categories) "share one core characteristic. They all ground the authority of the canon in something outside the canon itself." (88) Can you hear the presuppositional argument? "What is needed, then, is a canonical model that...seeks to ground the canon in the only place it could be grounded, its own authority. After all, if the canon bears the very authority of God, to what other standard could it appeal to justify itself? Even when God swore oaths, 'he swore by himself' (Heb. 6:13).

But Kruger isn't a fideist:

We shall argue that when it comes to the question of canon, the Scriptures themselves provide grounds for considering external data: the apostolicity of books, the testimony of the church, and so forth. Of course, this external evidence is not to be used as an independent and neutral 'test' to determine what counts as canonical; rather it should always be seen as something warranted by Scripture and interpreted by Scripture. (90)

One more quote, striking at the essence of presuppositionalism:

How do we offer an account of how we know that an ultimate authority is, in fact, the ultimate authority? If we try to validate an ultimate authority by appealing to some other authority, then we have just shown that it is not really the ultimate authority. 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)

Right: if God speaks, what are you going to do, run His claims through the NPOV community at Wikipedia? Are they neutral?

Kruger spends the rest of the book exploring three scripturally justified "attributes" of canonicity which allow the Bible to speak on its own behalf: 1) its divine qualities, 2) its apostolic origins, and 3) the corporate reception of the church.

This is an excellent book, a must-read. Kruger adeptly uses the Bible, stays up with current discussions, and brings in historical theology. My copy is absolutely filled with neon highlights. Kruger has performed a very important service for the church of Jesus Christ.

Drew Dill says

Super clear, and to the point. His arguments were sound and dealt really faithfully with other views on canon such as Romes view, and Lutherans views, as well as the main views of fundamentalist.

Scott says

This was a very timely book. Michael Kruger is president of RTS in Charlotte, NC whose specialization is in canonical studies. He has interacted with various scholars and published this fine work establishing intellectual grounds for the Christian belief in the NT canon.

In the first part of the book, he looks at various methods for establishing canon -- community determined models and historically determined models -- but argues that the canon is self-authenticating and thus other models fall short because they use some outside source of authority for justification. Even still, the self-authenticating model, contra historically and community determined models, is three-dimensional in that it has divine qualities, apostolic origins, and community reception. Thus, "canon has an ecclesiological dimension, a historical dimension, and an aesthetic/internal dimensions. It is when a single aspect of canon is absolutized at the expense of the others that distortions inevitably arise." (p. 293)

The second half of the book defends the model put forth by Kruger and convincingly puts to death various myths surrounding canon such as the idea that there were all sorts of "competing factions" (i.e. rejected books like Gospel of Thomas) putting their books in for consideration, as well as showing that the idea of canon was not a Constantinian invention but was already present in earliest Christianity (c. 2nd century).

All in all this was a very fine book. I have always wanted to find a book that discusses the history of the canon as well as trying to understand "what to do" with texts like the Shepherd of Hermas and other books valued by early Christians. This book not only does what other books do in exploring the history of the canon (e.g. Canon of Scripture by F.F. Bruce) but also goes one step further in showing how Christians

throughout the ages have understood how to understand canon.

The one thing I wish Kruger would have done additionally is explore the church's understanding of the canon not only in the patristics but also in later generations (i.e. Reformers). But alas, one book simply cannot do it all, nor would that be particularly necessary for what he was arguing for.

I am deeply grateful for Kruger's work and will forward sections of the book to Christians struggling with the historicity of the Scripture, as well as those who just want to know how we got the Bible as we have it today.
