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THE SELF-AUTHENTICATING MODEL OF CANON:

DEFINITION, BENEFITS, AND LIMITATIONS

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BY
NOAH W. KELLEY
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*Where God has spoken, revealed truth becomes the starting point of consistent knowledge; revelation is the test of truth, furnishes the framework and corrective for natural reason, introduces consistency into fragmentary human knowledge.*

– C. F. H. Henry[1]


## Introduction

The NT canon is of utmost importance for the life of the individual Christian and the corporate church of Jesus Christ. However, many people raise questions about whether or not we can know for sure what books belong. On the one hand, Roman Catholic scholars claim that Protestants are inconsistent to believe in sola Scriptura in light of the issue of the canon. One such writer says that a "problem for *sola Scriptura* is the canon of the New Testament. There is no 'inspired table of contents' in Scripture that tells us which books belong and which ones do not."[2] On the other hand, some historical-critical scholars propose that we revise the NT and change its contents.[3]

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[1] Quoted in Ronald H. Nash, *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1988), 96.

[2] Patrick Madrid, "*Sola Scriptura*: A Blueprint for Anarchy," in *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura*, edited by Robert A. Sungenis (Santa Barbara: Queenship Publishing, 1997), 22.

[3] For example, see Robert W. Funk, "The Once and Future New Testament," pages 541–557 in *The Canon Debate*, edited by Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002).

How should Christians respond to these questions? How can we know what books belong in the NT? This paper will explore the self-authenticating (SA) model for determining the NT canon, and will try to demonstrate the benefits and limitations of such an approach. It will proceed by defining the SA model and giving a brief overview of its historical development, explore how the SA model addresses the questions of the ontology of the NT canon (i.e. the question of what it is) and the epistemology of the NT canon (i.e. how can we know it). Finally it will reflect on the usefulness of such a model in the study of the NT canon.

## Definition

The Self-authentication (SA) model is based on the idea that the primary way that the NT writings are known to be Scripture is by the evidence that they themselves bear. As John Murray states, ". . . Scripture evidences itself to be the Word of God; its divinity is self-evidencing and self-authenticating. The ground of faith in Scripture as the Word of God is therefore the evidence it inherently contains of its divine authorship and quality."[4] The Scriptures are therefore said to be self-authenticating, or *autopistic*.[5] This model often focuses on the idea that the Scriptures were not chosen by the church, but rather "imposed themselves as such [i.e. as canon] upon the church."[6]

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[4] John Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, 2nd ed.; edited by N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1967), 46–47. Note that this presumes that "canon," "Scripture," and "the Word of God" are roughly synonymous. While the term "canon" can be defined in various ways, (functionally, exclusively, ontologically), the SA model assumes and arises out of a confessionally Protestant doctrine of Scripture that puts the emphasis on the ontological definition. For a discussion of the various definitions and how they might relate to one another, see Michael J. Kruger, "The Definition of the Term 'Canon': Exclusive or Multi-dimensional?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 63.1 (2012): 1–20.

[5] "Scripture clearly testifies to its own inspiration and authority. It is self-authenticating (*autopiston*), inherently authoritative" (F. H. Klooster, "Internal Testimony of the Spirit," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed.; edited by Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 611).

[6] Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 287; C. E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 239–246. Metzger here alludes to the Karl Barth, who writes, "Was macht

# History

The idea that Scripture is "self-authenticating" can be found in the early fathers who wrote in the

centuries before Augustine.[7] Charles E. Hill states that "While Christians responded to numerous

attacks on Scripture by defending it against charges of falsehood of various kinds, the divine

origin and authority of their Scriptures was not, generally speaking, something they could or

needed to 'prove,' but was that by which they proved all things."[8]

gerade die Bibel alten und neuen Testamentes zum Kanon? Warum muß die Erinnerung der Kirche an Gottes geschehene Offenbarung immer wieder gerade die Bibel zum konkreten Gegenstand haben? Es soll kein Ausweichen vor dieser mit Recht immer neu zu stellenden Frage bedeuten, wenn wir zunächst sofort antworten: die Bibel macht sich selbst zum Kanon. Sie ist Kanon, weil sie sich als solcher der Kirche imponiert hat und immer wieder imponiert. . . . Meinten wir angeben zu können, warum dem so ist, dann täten wir ja doch wieder, als hätten wir ein Maß in Händen, an dem wir die Bibel zu messen und auf Grund dessen wir ihr jene ausgezeichnete Stellung anzuweisen in der Lage wären. Unsere letzte und entscheidende Weisheit wäre dann doch wieder die Weisheit eines Selbstgesprächs, wenn auch eines über die Bibel geführten Selbstgesprächs. Nein, die Bibel ist schon darum Kanon, weil sie es ist. Aber sie ist es, indem sie sich als solcher imponiert" (Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* [Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelischen Buchhandlung, 1955], I/1:109–110).

[7] Charles E. Hill, "'The Truth Above All Demonstration': Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine," pages 43–88 in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, edited by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

[8] Hill, "The Truth," 46. Hill helpfully shows how writers such as Justin Martyr, Ps. Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Eusebius wrote with a more-or-less explicit assumption that the Scriptures functioned as a kind of "unprovable first principle" (pp. 46–54). The following are some helpful highlights (with Hill's transliteration of certain Greek terms removed): 1) The old man from whom Justin Martyr learned the Christian faith encouraged him to turn from philosophers to the OT prophets, because they "did not use demonstration [i.e. philosophical argumentation] in their treatises, seeing that they were witnesses to the truth above all demonstration and worthy of belief" (p. 47, quoting *Dial* 7.2). 2) A second or third century writing falsely attributed to Justin says that "The word of truth is free, and carries its own authority, disdaining to fall under any skillful argument, or to endure the logical scrutiny of its hearers. But it would be believed for its own nobility, and for the confidence due to him who sends it. Now the word of truth is sent from God; wherefore the freedom claimed by the truth is not arrogant. For being sent with authority it were not fit that it should be required to produce proof of what is said; since neither is there any proof beyond itself, which is God. For every proof is more powerful and trustworthy than that which it proves. . . . But nothing is either more powerful or more trustworthy than the truth" (p. 48, quoting *Res*. 1.1–6). 3) Clement of Alexandria, responding to the criticisms of Galen that Christians did not rely on proofs, but on faith, "defends the priority of faith by pointing out that some things (both ideas and material objects) do not stand in need of demonstration. In several places in the *Stromateis* Clement discusses what Aristotle had called 'first principles' (*archai*), things that are true and primary, and 'convincing on the strength not of anything else but of themselves' [quoting Aristotle, *Topics* 100b19]. Clement found this concept conducive to explaining the role of Christian faith to critics like Galen: 'Should one say that knowledge is founded on demonstration by a process of reasoning, let him hear that first principles are incapable of demonstration' (*Stromateis* 2.4.13.4). What is paramount here is to recognize that for Clement, whatever God says in Scripture has, perforce, the character of an indemonstrable first principle" (p. 49). See also Clement's clear statements to this effect: Ἔχομεν γὰρ τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς

At the time of the Reformation, this idea became a crucial plank in the Protestant Reformers' argument that the Scriptures were the final authority. This view, captured in the slogan *sola Scriptura*, was the "so-called 'formal principle' of the Reformation."[9] In response to the Roman Catholic Church, which insisted that the infallibility of the church ensured the proper interpretation of the Scripture, as well as providing the believer with assurance regarding the contents of the canon, the Reformers replied that the Scriptures were self-interpreting and self-authenticating.[10] While the Catholic Church agreed that the Scriptures were authoritative in and of themselves, they claimed that the church was needed to validate the authority of the canon.[11] So Ridderbos says,

> According to the Roman Catholic view, the Canon viewed in itself (*quoad se*) possesses undoubted inherent authority. But as it concerns us (*quoad nos*) the recognition of the Canon rests upon the authority of the Church. . . . The Reformation . . . did not make the authority of the Canon dependent upon the Church, but primarily upon the evidences of

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διδασκαλίας τὸν Κύριον, διά τε τῶν προφητῶν διά τε τοῦ Εὐαγγελίου καὶ διὰ τῶν μακαρίων ἀποστόλων πολυτρόπως καὶ πολυμερῶς ἐξ ἀρχῆς εἰς τέλος ἡγούμενον τῆς γνώσεως. Τὴν ἀρχὴν δ' εἴ τις ἕτερον δεῖσθαι ὑπολάβοι, οὐκέτ' ἂν ὄντως ἀρχὴ φυλαχθείη. Ὁ μὲν οὖν ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ πιστὸς τῇ κυριακῇ Γραφῇ τε καὶ φωνῇ ἀξιόπιστος, εἰκότως ἂν διὰ τοῦ Κυρίου πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἀνθρώπων εὐεργεσίαν ἐνεργουμένη. Ἀμέλει πρὸς τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων εὕρεσιν, αὐτῇ χρώμεθα κριτηρίῳ· τὸ κρινόμενον δὲ πᾶν ἔτι ἄπιστον πρὶν κριθῆναι· ὥστ' οὐδ' ἀρχὴ τὸ κρίσεως δεόμενον. Εἰκότως τοίνυν πίστει περιβαλόντες ἀναπόδεικτον τὴν ἀρχήν, ἐκ περιουσίας καὶ τὰς ἀποδείξεις παρ' αὐτῆς τῆς ἀρχῆς περὶ τῆς ἀρχῆς λαβόντες, φωνῇ Κυρίου παιδευόμεθα πρὸς τὴν ἀπίγνωσιν τῆς ἀληθείας. Οὐ γὰρ ἁπλῶς ἀποφαινομένοις ἀνθρώποις προσέχοιμεν, οἷς καὶ ἀνταποφαίνεσθαι ἐπίσης ἔξεστιν. Εἰ δ' οὐκ ἀρκεῖ μόνον ἁπλῶς εἰπεῖν τὸ δόξαν, ἀλλὰ πιστώσασθαι δεῖ τὸ λεχθέν, οὐ τὴν ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀναμένομεν μαρτυρίαν, ἀλλὰ τῇ τοῦ Κυρίου φωνῇ πιστούμεθα τὸ ζητούμενον· ἢ πασῶν ἀποδείξεων ἐχεγγυωτέρα, μᾶλλον δὲ ἢ μόνη ἀπόδειξις οὖσα τυγχάνει· . . . Οὕτως οὖν καὶ ἡμεῖς, ἀπ' αὐτῶν περὶ αὐτῶν τῶν Γραφῶν τελείως ἀποδεικνύντες, ἐκ πίστεως πειθόμεθα ἀποδεικτικῶς (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 7.16 [PG 9:532–533]).

⁹ David G. Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 342. The "formal principle" of the final authority of Scripture goes hand-in-hand with the "material principle" of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. For an excellent defense of *sola Scriptura*, see John C. Peckham, "Sola Scriptura: Reductio Ad Absurdum?" *Trinity Journal* 35 (2014): 195–223.

¹⁰ Dunbar, "Biblical Canon," 343.

¹¹ John M. Frame, "The Spirit and the Scriptures," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 220. Roman Catholic apologists are quick to point this out as part of their attack on sola Scriptura. So Philip Blosser says, ". . . what is at issue is not (1) the property of being canonical (inspired), which Catholics would agree is 'a function of Scripture,' but rather (2) the identification of the canon. . . . the ontological property of being canonical (inspired) does not even begin to answer the essential epistemological question at issue (how we identify the canon)" (Philip Blosser, "What are the Philosophical and Practical Problems of *Sola Scriptura*?" in *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of* Sola Scriptura, edited by Robert A. Sungenis [Santa Barbara: Queenship Publishing, 1997], 52).

Scripture itself and upon the internal witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the believers (*testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum*).[12]

This combination of the objective evidences of the Scripture and the subjective persuasion by the Holy Spirit are the defining characteristics of the Reformed doctrine of SA.[13] The objective evidences of Scripture's authority demonstrate that the Scriptures are inherently authoritative, and traditionally include the following:[14] 1) their "beauty and excellency."[15] Because the Scriptures are God's own words, they are characterized by the beauty and majesty of God himself.[16] However, this is a "spiritual beauty, not just an aesthetic one."[17] In other words, it is not that the writers of Scripture were better writers, but that the content of what they wrote is inherently beautiful, as it centers on the glory and majesty of the triune God and the grace of God given to sinners in Jesus Christ. 2) Their "power and efficacy."[18] Here, what is meant is the fact that the Scriptures have an impact in peoples' lives unlike any other book.[19] Those who read the NT find that they encounter Christ in its pages. C. E. Hill says about the early Christians that "Sympathetic readers and hearers of the handed-down Gospels felt that through these books they encountered the real Jesus and divine power."[20] 3) Their "unity and harmony."[21] The books of

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[12] Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, trans. by H. De Jongste; rev. by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1988), 190.

[13] See Dunbar, "Biblical Canon," 343; James M. Sawyer, "Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament." *Grace Theological Journal* 11.1 (1991), 46; Murray, "Attestation," 46–47; John C. Vander Stelt, "Witness of the Holy Spirit," pages 396–398 in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, edited by Donald K. McKim (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); F. H. Klooster, "Internal Testimony," 610–611; Frame, "The Spirit," 220. Most helpful is the extensive treatment by Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).

[14] Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 126–127. Kruger derives these from the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.5.

[15] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 127.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid, 128.

[18] Ibid, 130.

[19] Ibid, 130–133.

[20] Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 239.

[21] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 133.

the NT cohere with each other and the OT. John Calvin viewed these divine characteristics as, in a sense, self-evident:

> As to the question, "how shall we be persuaded that it came from God without recurring to a decree of the church?" it is just the same as if it were asked, "how shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter?" Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black do of their color, sweet and bitter of their taste.[22]

However, it is equally clear that not all people recognize these divine marks when they read Scripture. What explains this? According to the Reformed tradition, it is not because of a defect in the evidence, but because of the sinfulness of men's hearts that they are unable to recognize the divine characteristics that are found in Scripture: "The darkness and depravity of man's mind by reason of sin make man blind to the divine excellence of Scripture. And the effect of sin is not only that it blinds the mind of man and makes it impervious to the evidence but also that it renders the heart of man utterly hostile to the evidence."[23] Thus, according to the Reformed tradition, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is the necessary means by which sinners are able to receive the Bible as God's Word:

> Thus the *testimonium* [the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit] is directed primarily at the heart of man, with the effect on the mind being a consequence of the change of the disposition of the heart. The *testimonium* is not a secret new argument or separate cognitive revelation that supplements the *indicia* [the divine characteristics of Scripture]. No new content is transmitted to the believer's mind by the *testimonium*. The *testimonium*, as Warfield points out, "is not a propositional revelation, but an instinctive 'sense.'"[24]

The Spirit does not, therefore, witness to the authority of Scripture by means of verbal propositions, but rather renders the heart willing to see the inherent authority of Scripture, and to

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[22] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), 1.7.2.
[23] Murray, "Attestation," 46–47.
[24] R. C. Sproul, "The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit," in *Inerrancy*, edited by Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 349.

submit oneself to that authority. Christ's sheep "hear [his] voice" (John 10:16).[25] The Scripture's own witness to itself, which is recognized by means of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, is thereby sufficient to establish the authority of Scripture.

The SA model in the Reformed tradition developed as a response to the Roman Catholic Church, as described above. However, the Enlightenment also challenged the canon of the NT, especially through the writing of J. S. Semler, who argued that "the shape of the canon is to be explained on purely historical grounds."[26] According to Ridderbos, while the Catholic Church attempted to submit the Scriptures to the Church, Semler's writings enthroned the enlightened historical scholar as the final authority over the Scriptures:

> It is well known that in the years 1771–1775 Johann Salomo Semler published his large work (*Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Kanons*), in which he set aside the *a priori* of the authority of the Canon. He asserted that the value of the books of the New Testament must be investigated critically, and that the Canon rested upon human decisions which often could not withstand the test of criticism. . . . Not the Canon, not the Bible, but the religious consciousness of the enlightened man is the final judge in matters of faith and life."[27]

Semler's most enduring contribution to historical-critical research is to drive a wedge between "Scripture" and "the Word of God," with the historical-critical scholar as the one who is competent to determine what in Scripture is truly revelation.[28] William Baird notes that "Semler's main thesis is that the canon is a historical problem that can be solved by the free use

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[25] Calvin says that "those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly" to the authority of Scripture (*Institutes* 1.7.5). In other words, they instinctively submit to the Scripture because they hear it as authoritative.

[26] Dunbar, 345.

[27] Herman N. Ridderbos, "The Canon of the New Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, edited by Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 191.

[28] See William Baird, *History of New Testament Research, Volume One: From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 120–124 for an overview of Semler's critique of the canon.

of the critical method. The effect of Semler's work is the dissolution of the classical, orthodox understanding of the canon."[29]

While not all scholars are as radical as Semler, many in the Reformed tradition resist attempts to allow historical research to play the dominant role in determing the canon. Kruger states it this way:

> 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. How can the Scriptures be the ultimate standard of truth if their reception is dependent upon some *other* (presumably more certain) standard?[30]

The problem that he and others point out is that historical-critical scholarship is constantly changing its opinions about the origins and genuineness of the NT books. The almost total lack of consensus among the scholars in the field of biblical studies provides a questionable foundation for the NT canon of the church. Kruger, therefore, rightly asks if we should change the shape of our canon depending on what each new generation of scholars determines is historically reliable.[31] The very fact that many Christians are unwilling to do so seems to indicate that while historical scholarship might help confirm the canonicity of the NT writings, for many the belief in the canonicity of these books is formed in some other way.

## SA and the Canon of the NT

Dunbar notes that in the Reformers, the SA view was appealed to more frequently to justify receiving the Bible as a whole than justifying the particular shape of the canon: ". . . among Lutheran and Reformed theologians, this witness was generally appealed to more to affirm the

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[29] Baird, *History*, 121.

[30] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 80; see also Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 32–33.

[31] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 80–81.

overall authority of the Bible than to validate the specific contents of the canon. For the latter

point, appeal was made to God's overriding providence."[32] However, the Reformed tradition as it

developed in the confessions often linked the internal testimony of the Spirit to the believer's

assurance regarding the contents of the canon (thus implying the SA model).[33]

The central idea that drives the use of SA model in the determination of the canon is that

a consistently Protestant view of Scripture must find a way to determine the limits of the canon

by appealing to the Bible itself, rather than appealing to external authorities such as the church or

historical-critical scholarship.[34] This is because if the Bible is "the supreme standard by which all

human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried," this implies that the Bible is to

have the final word in which books are to be included in the NT canon.[35] However, because the

Bible does not contain an "inspired table of contents," it therefore becomes be necessary to

reflect on how the Scripture might be able to speak to the question of the canon.

There are three ways that the SA of Scripture is appealed to in discussions about the

canon of Scripture, what we might call SA 1, SA 2, and SA 3. SA 1 is an appeal to Scripture's

own statements ("self-attestation") to show that Scripture is the Word of God, and to attempt by

means of them to provide the specific contents of the canon of Scripture.[36] Wayne Grudem, for

example, attempts to show that the OT shows that God speaks, and that God's words may be

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[32] Dunbar, "The Biblical Canon," 343.

[33] Klooster, "Internal Testimony," 610. See especially the French confession of 1559 (section IV): "Nous connaissons ces livres être canoniques et règle très certaine de notre foi (Ps 12.7; Ps 19.8-9), non tant par le commun accord et consentement de l'Eglise, que par le témoignage et persuasion intérieure du Saint-Esprit qui les nous fait discerner d'avec les autres livres ecclésiastiques. Sur lesquels, encore qu'ils soient utiles, on ne peut fonder aucun article de foi" (Michael H. Anderson, ed. "The French Confession 1559," *Creeds of Christendom*. Last updated 12/11/2008. [http://www.creeds.net/reformed/frconf.htm] Accessed 10/25/16. (http://www.creeds.net/reformed/frconf.htm) 10/25/16).

[34] For a fully-developed attempt to provide such a model, see Kruger, *Canon Revisited*.

[35] BF&M 2000 (I. The Scriptures).

[36] An excellent example of this approach is Wayne Grudem, "Scripture's Self-attestation and the Problem of Formulating a Doctrine of Scripture," pages 19–59 in *Scripture and Truth*, edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

written down;[37] the NT authors considered the OT to be God's words;[38] the NT writings are written with an awareness of divine authority, and are viewed as on par with the OT writings.[39] According to this approach, we can develop an ontology of canon, as well as define (to some degree) the extent of the canon based on the direct statements of Scripture.

For those who are persuaded of the authority of Scripture, this SA 1 will be found useful in terms of giving direct statements from Scripture regarding the nature of the canon as God's words. It also provides some direction in terms of the extent of the canon, such as the implication that books such as the gospel of Luke (1 Tim 5:17–18) and an undefined group of Paul's letters (2 Pet 3:16) belong in the canon. The limitations of this approach are the converse: if one does not already accept the authority of Scripture, these statements will not be particularly convincing. Furthermore, while some parts of the NT can be deduced from the statements of Scripture, it is far from providing us with an "inspired table of contents."[40]

SA 2 is what might be called the "self-authenticating model proper" because it is historically what has been meant when people used the term "self-authentication." It is not so much a matter of Scripture's direct statements as it is the inherent authority of the writings themselves, which is able to be recognized by the subjective working of the Holy Spirit (as described above).

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[37] Grudem, "Self-attestation," 19–36.

[38] Ibid, 37–45.

[39] Ibid, 45–51.

[40] As noted by one Roman Catholic apologist, who says, "The argument that some biblical texts cite others as 'Scripture' is credible as far as it goes; but it does not go far (we don't even know that the book which cites another is itself inspired), and it certainly does not provide the means by which to identify the entire canon" (Blosser, "Philosophical Problems," 51–52).

As used in the determination of the canon, SA 2 stresses the individual and corporate reception of the canon as evidence of the canonicity of the NT writings.[41] So Kruger argues that "the church's reception of these books is a natural and inevitable outworking of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture. . . . . In this way, then, the role of the church is like a thermometer, not a thermostat. Both instruments provide information about the temperature in the room—but one determines it and one reflects it."[42] It also stresses that the individual Christian can have confidence in the NT canon because of the work of the Spirit which convinces him of the divine origin of the NT writings.

SA 3 is similar to SA 1, except rather than deducing the nature and contents of the canon from the direct statements of Scripture, the canon is determined with help from a more robust theologizing about the nature of the canon.[43] In this view, the term SA refers not only

> to the fact that canonical books bear divine qualities (although they do), but [also] to the way the canon itself provides the necessary direction and guidance about how it is to be authenticated. . . . . A self-authenticating canon is not just a canon that claims to have authority [SA 1], nor is it simply a canon that bears internal evidence of authority [SA 2], but one that guides and determines how that authority is to be established.[44]

SA 3 attempts to use logically deduced theological reasoning to weave a theology of canon with multiple threads, such as the following:[45]

- The doctrine of providence and the assumption that God wants his revelation to be available.[46]

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[41] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 103–108; Sawyer, "Evangelicals"; Charles A. Briggs, *General Introduction to the Study of Holy Scripture: The Principles, Methods, History and Results of Its Several Departments and of the Whole* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), 163–168; Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, 9.

[42] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 106.

[43] Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*; Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "The New Testament as Canon," pages 165–184 in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a Challenge, a Debate*, edited by Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988). Kruger's *Canon Revisited* also utilizes this approach, though he brings it together with the second approach mentioned above.

[44] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 91.

[45] Ibid, 94.

[46] "If God intended to give a canon to his corporate church—and not just to an isolated congregation for a limited period of time—then we have every reason to believe that he would providentially preserve these books and

- The redemptive-historical significance of the apostles as authoritative witnesses to the final and definitive revelation of God in Christ.[47]
- The necessity of the Holy Spirit for the recognition of Scripture and heartfelt trust in their authority.[48]

Using such resources, this third model attempts to provide a theological grid through which the historical investigation of the Scriptures can be carried out. Along this vein, Kruger writes, ". . . even though the Scripture does not directly tell us which books belong in the New Testament canon (i.e., there is no inspired 'table of contents'), we can account for that knowledge if we apply Scripture to the question."[49]

## SA Model and an Ontology of Canon

The specific question of determining the canon actually involves two distinct questions: 1) the nature of the canon (the ontological question), and 2) the extent of the canon and how we are to discover it (the epistemological question).[50] Both of these questions are addressed to some degree by the SA model.

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expose them to the church so that, through the Holy Spirit, it can rightly recognize them as canonical." (Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 94–97). According to John Frame, based on Scripture we are justified in reasoning that God wants to speak to us, so there must be a canon so that we can distinguish his words from the words of mere humans, and furthermore, if this is true, we should expect God to make his words available so that we can find them, since our salvation depends on them (John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* [Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010], 134–135).

[47] "Here we are distinguishing the redemptive-historical idea of the Canon, in which we may take note of three main elements: 1. That of exclusive authority, according to the authorization of the apostles by Christ himself; 2. That of a qualitatively closed unity, according to the unrepeatable and unique character of the apostolic witness; 3. That of fixation and stabilization, according to its destination as foundation and *depositum custodi* of the Church" (Ridderbos, "Canon," 196); cf. aslo Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 108–111; both Herman Ridderbos (*Redemptive History*) and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. ("The New Testament as Canon") both make extensive use out of SA 3.

[48] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 99–103. This is related to the SA 2, except whereas SA 2 addresses the *experience* of the phenomenon of the internal witness, SA 3 addresses *what Scripture teaches us* about this phenomenon.

[49] Ibid, 94.

[50] The two-fold question is recognized by Blosser, "Philosophical Problems," 52. See also Metzger, who distinguishes between "the ground of canonicity and the grounds for the conviction of canonicity" (*Canon*, 284). By "ground of canonicity," he means the question of what makes a book canonical. He rightly says that the ground of canonicity is a question of theology, which addresses what is being called here the ontological question, or the question of the nature of canonicity. By "ground for the conviction of canonicity," he means the question of how we

In terms of the ontology of Scripture, the SA model does not stand on its own, but assumes and arises out of a confessionally Protestant understanding of Scripture. This is because, as Kruger says, "the doctrine of Scripture shapes one's canonical model. The *method* by which the canon is authenticated is correlative with the *nature* of the canon being authenticated."[51] John C. Peckham rightly notes that the *nature* of canonicity is therefore "logically prior" to the question of *which particular books* belong to the canon.[52] This makes it impossible to approach the issue of canon without dealing with the "ontology" of the canon, that is, the question of what the canon *is*.

However, it is important to note that an ontology of canon cannot arise from a historical study of the canon; it requires the resources of theology: "Historical inquiry by its very nature is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*, and its conclusions can only be expressed by probabilities. Ontological and normative questions, traditionally the province of theology, are not amenable to a strictly historical approach."[53] Metzger agrees that the question of what makes something canonical "falls within the province of theology."[54]

In line with SA 1 and SA 3, we turn to Scripture itself for the answer to the question of the nature of the canon. The results of such an investigation reveal that according to Scripture, the Bible consists of God's very words.[55] These books are canonical "based on the intrinsic

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know which books belong in the canon, what is being called here the epistemological question. Metzger says that this question belongs to the domain of the historian, a claim that this paper will qualify.

[51] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 99.

[52] John C. Peckham, "Intrinsic Canonicity and the Inadequacy of the Community Approach to Canon-Determination," *Themelios* 36 no. 2 (Aug. 2011), 204.

[53] John M. Linebarger, "History Meets Theology: Three Recent Books about the Canon, A Review Article," *Crux* 27 no. 3 (September 1991), 37.

[54] Metzger, *Canon*, 284.

[55] See the discussion from Grudem ("Self-attestation") above.

merits of the books."[56] Based on such an approach, we can define canon as "the authoritative books that God gave his corporate church."[57]

If this view regarding the canon is true, then it becomes obvious that the books of the NT were canonical (from one perspective) the moment they were written.[58] Furthermore, these books are not made canonical by the church's actions, but *recognized* to be canonical by their reception.[59] Ricahrd B. Gaffin Jr. draws an important distinction:

> The origin of the New Testament canon is not the same as its reception by the church. We must avoid confusing the existence of the canon with its recognition, what is constitutive (God's action) with what is reflexive (the church's action). The activity of the church—statements of church fathers, decrees of councils, and so forth concerning the contents of the New Testament—does not create the canon."[60]

An approach such as this one, while not controversial, scandalous, or otherwise radical from the standpoint of confessional Protestant theology, nevertheless stands out like a sore thumb among canon scholars, among whom the dominant approach is to view canon in terms of the church's activity of designating a closed list and imposing canonical status upon a particular set of books.[61]

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[56] John C. Peckham, "The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity," *Trinity Journal* 28 (2007), 234.

[57] Kruger, "Definition," 14. Kruger calls this the "ontological" definition, which he sees as being compatible with a "functional" and "exclusive" definition (p. 17). He says that each of these definitions capture a particular dimension of "canonical history." Books are given by God to the church (ontological definition), which are subsequently used in the life of the church (functional definition), and finally the church reaches a general consensus about the books (exclusive definition). For a response to Kruger's ontological definition of canon, see John C. Poirier, "An Ontological Definition of 'Canon'?" *BBR* 24.4 (2014): 457–466.

[58] Metzger, *Canon*, 283.

[59] Peckham states that "the books of the Bible are inherently canonical, even if they were not always universally recognized, just as Jesus was truly the Messiah even though some did not recognize him. In this way, divinely appointed books would be intrinsically canonical independent of extrinsic recognition" (Peckham, "Biblical Authority," 234).

[60] Gaffin, "The New Testament as Canon," 171–172.

[61] Lee Martin McDonald says that "Biblical canons are by their nature a human response to what is believed to be the revelation of God" (*The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 56). See also, Eugene Ulrich, "The Notion and Definition of Canon," pages 21–35 in *The Canon Debate*, edited by Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002).

While it is completely understandable that for the purpose of engaging the broader academic community we might limit ourselves at times to premises that our audience also accepts, it seems that we should, on other occasions, be able to formulate our views based on premises that we are persuaded of by virtue of our Christian confession. Ridderbos helpfully points out that for the scholar who confesses a belief that Scripture is God's Word, it is not possible to make a separation between what he confesses and his "scientific investigation of the Bible," because "Human life is a unity."[62] This unity pushes us to think through how our confessional stances relate to our study of the canon.

### SA Model and an Epistemology of Canon

This leads to the question of how the SA addresses the second question of an epistemology of canon. In other words, according to the SA model, how can we determine the extent of the canon? Significantly, this is one of the main points that Roman Catholic apologists bring up against *sola Scriptura*. They argue that Protestants contradict the Scripture principle by either accepting the traditional canon, or risk ecclesial anarchy by a subjective and individualistic appeal to the Holy Spirit.

Conversely, historical-critical scholarship also implicitly makes a challenge to Protestant claims to be able to know what books are canonical. By proceeding on the basis of methodological naturalism, they implicitly charge confessional Christians with holding to an unwarranted view of the canon based on "unscientific" (and thereby illegitimate) method.[63] This commitment to methodological naturalism (and the naturalistic worldview that stands behind it)

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[62] Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, viii.
[63] For an important critique of methodological naturalism in historical-critical scholarship, see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152–162.

in fact gives rise to an implied ontology of canon (just as surely as a confessional doctrine of Scripture gives rise to the ontology of canon mentioned above) characterized by the assumption that there is nothing unique about the writings of the NT in themselves, only an authoritative status that is imposed upon them from the church.[64] If canon is something that the church does rather than something that God does, then the proper epistemological method for determining the canon is simply to study the historical development of the church's reception of the canon.

We have claimed that the ontology of canon drives the epistemology of canon. How might the task of determining the canon on the basis of the SA model be expressed in light of the resources of Christian theology? I propose that the following three questions are related in principle (moving from a broad to narrow demonstration of the epistemological mechanism behind SA):

1. "How do I know that Christianity is true?"
2. "How do I know that the Bible is the Word of God?"
3. "How do I know that each book of the NT is the Word of God?"

### 1. "How do I Know that Christianity is True?"

First, the question "How do I know that Christianity is true?" This question has taken the attention of many of Christianity's biggest thinkers.[65] William Lane Craig frames the question this way: "Exactly how do we know Christianity to be true? Is it simply by a leap of faith or on the authority of the Word of God, both unrelated to reason? Does religious experience assure us of the truth of the Christian faith, so that no further justification is needed? Or is an evidential

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[64] For some illustrations of this view, see the works cited in Michael J. Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 18–20.

[65] For a historical survey of this question from Augustine to Alvin Plantinga, see William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 29–43.

foundation for faith necessary without which faith would be unjustified and irrational?"[66] In

other words, what is the relationship between faith and reason?

Craig affirms, on the basis of the work of Alvin Plantinga and others, that Christianity is

known to be true by the persuasion of the Holy Spirit.[67]

> I mean that the experience of the Holy Spirit is veridical and unmistakable (though not
> necessarily irresistible or indubitable) for him who has it; that such a person does not
> need supplementary arguments or evidence in order to know and to know with
> confidence that he is in fact experiencing the Spirit of God; that such experience does not
> function in this case as a premise in any argument from religious experience to God, but
> is rather is the immediate experiencing of God himself; that in certain contexts the
> experience of the Holy Spirit will imply the apprehension of certain truths of the
> Christian religion, such as "God exists," "I am condemned by God," "I am reconciled to
> God," "Christ lives in me," and so forth; that such an experience provides one not only
> with a subjective assurance of Christianity's truth, but with objective knowledge of that
> truth; and that arguments and evidence incompatible with that truth are overwhelmed by
> the experience of the Holy Spirit for him who attends fully to it.[68]

What is significant to note is that Craig is claiming that by the persuasion of the Holy Spirit, one

can be persuaded of the truth of the gospel in such a way that they can say that they *know* these

things to be true, and know them *directly*, rather than as a conclusion produced from an argument

or inferred from evidence. Similarly, Alvin Plantinga says the following:

> Christian belief in the typical case is not the conclusion of an argument or accepted on the
> evidential basis of other beliefs, or accepted just because it constitutes a good explanation
> of phenomena of one kind or another. . . . In the typical case, therefore, Christian belief is
> immediate; it is formed in the basic way. It doesn't proceed by way of an argument.[69]

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[66] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 29.

[67] Ibid, 43–44. Scriptural content is assumed in both Craig and Plantinga. What is under discussion is the mechanism by which believers form true beliefs.

[68] Ibid, 43.

[69] Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 64–65. See also Bernard Ramm, who coming at the issue from a theological rather than philosophical perspective, says that the witness of the Spirit is "a direct apprehension of something as true, and not a conclusion at the end of a short or long chain of reasoning" (Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit*, 84).

Plantinga says that when Christian belief is formed, we experience it as something that "seems clearly and obviously true."[70] In Plantinga's model, we can be said to know things on the basis of faith in a direct way, similar to the way we form true beliefs on the basis of memory and sense perception.[71]

This approach seems to reflect the general tenor of Scripture regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian knowledge. As Craig points out, Paul seems to link the Holy Spirit to the assurance that believers have of their salvation (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15–16; Col 2:2; 1 Thess 1:5, etc.).[72] Similarly, John teaches that the Holy Spirit gives assurance of the truth of the Christian faith (1 John 2:20, 27) and assurance of salvation (1 John 3:24; 4:13).[73] Furthermore, the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary if unbelievers are to become convinced of the truth of Christianity (John 6:44) because sinners by nature will not receive the truth (Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14).[74]

This raises the issue of the role of reason and evidence. Is the believer now sealed off from any evidence that might disprove the Christian faith? Is he isolated from the phenomena of history and the world outside of the Bible by a hermetically sealed epistemology? The answer is no. First, reason and evidence, though not properly the basis of our assurance of the truth of the gospel, can strengthen, confirm, and defend the truthfulness of the Christian faith on the basis of evidence and reason. This secondary role might be called the "ministerial use" of reason. As Craig says,

> I think Martin Luther correctly distinguished between what he called the magisterial and ministerial uses of reason. The *magisterial use* of reason occurs when reason stands over and above the gospel like a magistrate and judges it on the basis of argument and evidence. The *ministerial use* of reason occurs when reason submits to and serves the

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[70] Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 61.

[71] In philosophical terms, we can know these things "basically." Basic beliefs are those that are known directly rather than being derived from other beliefs or rational processes (Nash, *Faith & Reason*, 81).

[72] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 44–45

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid, 46–47.

gospel. In light of the Spirit's witness, only the ministerial use of reason is legitimate. . . . [As] Anselm put it, ours is a faith that seeks understanding. A person who knows that Christianity is true on the basis of the witness of the Spirit may also have a sound apologetic which reinforces or confirms for him the Spirit's witness, but does not serve as the basis of his belief.[75]

Secondly, while reason and evidence do not provide the basis for the assurance of the Christian faith, it is possible that evidence could be brought forward that could *overthrow* Christian belief. Because historical claims (among others) are *implied* in the gospel, while Christianity could be believed without proving those claims *individually* to be true (because the whole could be accepted on the basis of the Spirit's persuasion), Christians would have reason to forsake faith if the implied claims were *falsified*.[76]

Finally, it should be noted that if this argument is true, it provides an important bulwark against the claims of many historical-critical scholars that Christian claims to have knowledge of past events are illegitimate unless they are based on the historical method.[77] It is possible for believers to have knowledge of the truth of the gospel that is not produced by argumentation or evidence, but rather produced by the persuasion of the Holy Spirit.[78]

## 2. "How do I Know that the Bible is the Word of God?"

If the above argument stands, we now descend to the narrower question of how one knows that the Bible is the Word of God. The preceding discussion was intended to provide a theological context in which this question can be answered, on the assumption that the persuasive work of

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[75] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 47–48.

[76] Paul Helm, "Faith, Evidence and Scripture," in *Scripture and Truth*, edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 316–317. He applies this primarily to the authority of Scripture, but the logic of the argument hold true here too: "So there is an important asymmetry here: historical evidence cannot by itself establish the authority of the Scriptures, but it could overthrow it" (p. 317).

[77] Van A. Harvey (*The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* [Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996]) makes such an argument.

[78] As a final note, it should be said that this is arguing only for assurance regarding the "basic truths of the Christian faith," not the "subtleties of Christian doctrine" (Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 44).

the Holy Spirit has application not only to the broad question of Christianity as a whole, but the narrower question of the Christian Scriptures.

We find that when we descend from the truth of Christianity to the Christian Scriptures, there is a necessary connection in the fact that the gospel, to which the Holy Spirit witnesses, can be said to be the *content* of the Scriptures. Bernard Ramm argues that because the Scriptures are the New Covenant documents that testify to Christ, the Spirit, who witnesses to Christ witnesses also to the Scriptures. Ramm claims that "he who says 'Abba, Father' will eventually say, 'this Book is God's truth.' He who has the part shortly possesses the whole."[79] He continues:

> When we believe, the truth of the gospel is sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We not only believe but we have a conviction in our hearts that we have believed the truth. . . . But when we seek to discover the source of this message, we invariably find our way to Sacred Scripture. . . . We are led and driven to the conclusion that the source of the message which saved our souls is higher than the medium which brought us the message. We are thus driven beyond minister, sermon, and sacrament to Holy Scripture as the ground (not the cause, which is the Holy Spirit) of our certainty, as the truth of God, and as the authority for our faith and of our faith.[80]

Thus we have good grounds for believing that the same kind of immediate "sense" of the truth of the gospel may function in the recognition of the Bible as God's Word.

While the work of the Holy Spirit in persuading people has been clearly discussed above, what about the evidence of the Scriptures themselves? Paul Helm argues persuasively that attempts to prove that the Bible is the Word of God based on measuring Scripture by some kind of external criteria fall flat.[81] This is because they all employ the argument that "there is some obvious, unquestionable test or criterion of what is appropriate for a divine revelation and that the Bible, and only the Bible, meets it."[82] The problem is that there is no "a priori standard of

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[79] Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit* 68
[80] Ibid, 68
[81] Helm, "Faith, Evidence and Scripture," 304–306.
[82] Ibid, 306.

reasonableness that the Scriptures must meet and do meet."[83] In other words, unless we allow the *Scriptures* to tell us what Scripture is, we cannot come up with a definition on our own that can be applied as a proper criteria by which we can evaluate them.

Rather than using an external criteria, Helm argues that "there are reasons for accepting the Scriptures as the Word of God and these reasons are chiefly to be found within the Scriptures themselves."[84] He goes on to cite as one of the main reasons for accepting the Bible as the Word of God the "force" or "impact of the Scriptures."[85] (Note that this is essentially what Kruger calls the "power and efficacy" of Scripture under SA 2 above.) What is significant about this argument is that it means that part of coming to the conclusion that the Bible is the Word of God is "experiencing" its content. He is arguing that belief in the Bible as the word of God is formed a posteriori, in light of the contents.[86] This coheres well with the SA 2 model, which states that it is the Scriptures themselves that testify to their divinity, and that it is the Holy Spirit that makes us capable of appreciating that testimony.

3. "How do I know that each book of the NT is the Word of God?"

If the previous arguments are accepted, then the SA model can claim to explain, in part, how the corporate church came to embrace these particular books as the content of the NT, and how the individual believer can have confidence in these books as the NT canon. From this perspective, the question of the NT canon, in part, is simply the narrowest form of the argument that was applied above to the gospel and the Bible as a whole. If the Holy Spirit is able to convince people of the truth of the gospel, and the truth of the gospel is the content of the Bible as a whole, then

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[83] Helm, "Faith, Evidence and Scripture," 306.
[84] Ibid, 309.
[85] Ibid, 310.
[86] Ibid, 310.

there is some ground to believe that the corporate church has received these books because, among other things, it heard the voice of the Shepherd in them.

Does this mean that the individual believer is to subject the Scriptures to "spiritual criticism" to discern subjectively of the NT books ought to be included in his own personal NT?[87] No. The SA model explains in part the assurance that the *individual believer* has that the books of the NT are in fact the canon that God wants him to have; however, this is a received canon, and so the SA model also purports to explain the reason that these books were received by the *corporate church*. Individuals may mistakenly judge a book to be canonical or non-canonical, but a strong evidence that we have the correct NT canon is the "predominant" consensus of the church.[88]

This consensus must be qualified in two ways: 1) it is not finally authoritative in itself, but in the SA model corporate reception is one "attribute" whereby canonical books may be recognized.[89] 2) This is not to say the consensus is a result of the *conscious* application of the SA model as a form of criteria by which to evaluate the NT books. Rather it explains the confidence that they had in these books that goes beyond a mere historically verified confidence, to the supernaturally-wrought conviction that these books were God's own Words.[90] Furthermore, it explains the same simple and reflexive trust that Christians demonstrate toward the Bible, a trust that is not necessarily supported by historical research.

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[87] Ridderbos, "Canon," 196. Sawyer, relying on Charles A. Briggs' articulation of the SA, seems to be more individualistic than is warranted when he says that "If scripture was self-evidencing, then that evidence that God was the author was to the individual. . . . An individual believer was thus free [on Briggs' view] to doubt the canonicity of a particular book without the fear of being charged with heresy" (Sawyer, "Evangelicals," 50).

[88] Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 105.

[89] Ibid, 106.

[90] Hill, "'The Truth Above All Demonstration.'"

## Evaluation: Benefits and Limitations of the SA Model

What remains is to reflect upon the question of what this model delivers in terms of benefits for the study of the NT canon, and what its limitations might be.

Benefits:

Most of the benefits can be summed up in terms of 1) providing a way for Christians (insiders) to have confidence in the NT canon, and 2) proactively interjecting the study of the canon with Christian theology in order to enable Christians to study the canon based on all of the knowledge, rather than limiting themselves to what is accepted by historical-critical scholars. More specifically, these benefits are as follows:

1. The SA model provides a way for Christians to determine the canon based on Scripture itself. This is necessary in order to refute those (such as the RCC) who criticize Protestants for being inconsistent with the Scripture principle in the determination of the canon. Thought there is no "inspired table of contents," the SA model can contribute to an understanding of canon that flows from Scripture. This is important because if the Scripture cannot function as the final authority in the matter of canon, then the whole principle of *sola Scriptura* is threatened.

It is important to notice that the SA model accounts for the NT canon *on Christian premises for the Christian community*. It is not an argument aimed at persuading secular scholars or unbelievers on neutral, objective data. It is a "thick" accounting that brings all of the resources of Christian theology to bear to show how one accounts for the canon within the Christian faith. Along these lines, William Lane Craig says that there is a difference between "knowing" Christianity to be true and "showing" Christianity to be true.[91] Building off the logic of that distinction, the SA model is way to explain how we *know* that these 27 books are canon; when it

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[91] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 43.

comes to *showing* the canon to be true, we can demonstrate that it is coherent and makes sense of the data, but we also insist that it is based on the belief that God speaks, which is not demonstrable by objective empirical facts, but is rather something that one comes to believe by the conviction that is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. The SA model brings focus to the fact that presuppositions (including theology and philosophy) determine many of the conclusions that scholars arrive at in contemporary discussions regarding the canon. Christian scholars may choose to play by the rules of the secular academy for various reasons: 1) they may attempt to show how the evidence that is accepted by secular scholars leads to certain true conclusions, and thus try to persuade them in some area of dispute. This is a worthy task. 2) They may also attempt to work *with* secular scholars to further the general knowledge of the academic community in areas that are not in dispute.

However, the SA model provides a way for Christians to avoid ultimately dichotomizing their knowledge and functioning in a semi-schizophrenic manner by accepting secular models of knowledge that are ultimately incompatible with the Christian faith. It does this by integrating the basic Christian beliefs (the depravity of man, the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit, the inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture) into the study of the question of canon.

3. The SA model provides an interpretive framework for evaluating external data. Much of canon studies consists of sifting through the data of historical research. The SA model proposes that the Scriptures themselves can guide us in our understanding of the significance of the historical data.

4. It supports the authority and canonicity of the Scriptures in the life of the Christian and the church, and explains why Christians are confident of Scripture. Perhaps most importantly, the SA model affirms that the Scriptures are fully authoritative and sufficient, and that they are not

in need of any external confirmation in order to be believed and obeyed. Craig gives two reasons

why he believes it is mistaken to give evidence and reason the primary role as the basis for faith:

> First, such a role would consign most Christians to irrationality. The vast majority of the human race have neither the time, training, nor resources to develop a full-blown Christian apologetic as the basis of their faith. . . . Second, if the magisterial role of reason were legitimate, then a person who had been given poor arguments for Christianity would have a just excuse before God for not believing in him.[92]

Applied to the question of the canon, if the Scriptures are in need of some kind of external

corroboration in order to be demonstrated to be true and worthy of belief, then those Christians

who believe the Scriptures instinctively are irrational; furthermore, if such external corroboration

is not put forward, there is no obligation for the hearers of Scripture to believe and obey.

This does not mean that we cannot or should not defend Scripture from attacks, or that

our belief in Scripture cannot be confirmed and strengthened by evidence or reason; rather it is to

say that the SA model affirms that Scripture is inherently authoritative, and accounts for the

mechanism by which Christians become persuaded of its authority.

<div align="center">Limitations<em>:</em></div>

As helpful as these benefits are, the SA model is not a "silver bullet." There are a number of

limitations.

1. The SA model, while useful for supporting a Christian view of the canon, will not be

persuasive to those who are outside. Virtually all of its premises are derived from beliefs that the

Christians accepts, but that the secular scholar would reject, or at least find inappropriate in the

historical study of the NT canon. For those who are outside, we can show how the historical

evidence is coherent with the SA view, and that the view has been historically held by Christians

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[92] Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 50.

from various traditions; but there is no historically-rooted case that can be made for its normativity.

2. The SA model does not, by itself, solve the issue of the extent of the canon. It requires outside data. While it gives us certain interpretive frameworks that provide useful in the investigation of the canon (such as the concepts of apostolic authorship, corporate reception, covenantal documents, etc.) actual research is needed to apply these concepts to the historical phenomena of the canon.

3. The SA model does not provide a hermetically sealed model of canon that cannot be subject to attack. It was mentioned earlier that while proving the historical credibility of the Scriptures is not necessary to establish their authority and canonicity, doubts about their credibility are sufficient to call it into question. When questions are raised regarding particular books, or the canon as a whole, it is not sufficient to simply respond that the books of the NT are self-authenticating. The questions must be taken seriously and research done to show that the objections do not stand.

**Conclusion**

The SA model, in sum, is a model for determining the canon of the NT that attempts to build the believer's assurance regarding the canon of the NT on the final authority of Scripture. It includes the direct statements of the Scriptures themselves (SA 1), the internal evidence of the Scriptures which are perceived by means of the Holy Spirit (SA 2), and a broad theologizing out of the contents of the canon that provides us with a framework for our investigation into the canon (SA 3). The SA explains what the canon is (its ontology) and how we can know the extent of it (its epistemology).

There are a number of benefits to the SA model, such as its ability to bring Christian theology to bear on the question of canon, and its ability to provide Christians with a way to account for their knowledge of the canon. Conversely, it is limited in its ability to function as a positive argument for those who are not already persuaded of the truth of Christianity, and rather than standing alone, needs to be complemented by historical data, whether for the purpose of making a positive argument for the NT canon, or for negatively defending the NT canon from attacks.

It is not likely that the SA model will be found equally persuasive by all Christian scholars. However, it is one attempt to bring unity to our knowledge of God and his Word, to apply the truth of Scripture to the study of the NT canon, and to recognize that in the NT we find the "first principles" for the study of the Scriptures themselves.

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