

The Divine Qualities of the Canon

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“All things the Divine Scripture says are utterances of the Holy Spirit.”

GREGORY OF NYSSA

Of all the attributes of canonicity, the divine qualities of Scripture are the least discussed on modern canonical studies. Most scholars prefer to devote their energies to the corporate reception of these books, or perhaps to their apostolic origins, but attention is rarely given to their divine qualities. This neglect is largely because a number of canonical models do not even acknowledge that such qualities *exist* in the canonical books. For the historical-critical model, the reason one book became canon and not another has less to do with the intrinsic qualities of the books themselves and more to do with the preferences and purposes of the early church that chose them. They are canonical not because of what they are but because of what the church is.¹ Likewise, the existential/neoorthodox model also denies that there is anything distinctive or intrinsic in the books themselves that sets them apart. For Barth, “The texts are authoritative not in virtue of any property they may have.”² Instead, what sets them apart is that the Spirit uses them, despite their ordinarieness, to speak to the church. In addition, even certain versions of the criteria-of-canonicity model largely overlook the content of the book and focus solely on the book’s apostolic origins.³

But this was not the approach of the early church fathers. Origen, for instance, was quite convinced that divine qualities played a central role: “If anyone ponders over the prophetic sayings... it is certain that in the very act of reading and diligently studying them his mind and feelings will be touched by a divine breath and he will recognize the words he is reading are not utterances of man but the language of God.”⁴ The Reformers were no different.⁵ The Belgic Confession

¹ H.Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 58-59.

² D.H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 47.

³ E.g., The divine qualities of the canonical books are largely overlooked in R.L. Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

⁴ *Princ.* 4.1.6. For Origen, all Scriptures were considered “prophetic sayings.”

argues that these books are identified as canonical not so much by the testimony of the church but because “the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they *prove themselves* to be from God.”⁶ And, as seen in the prior chapter, these same views were held by Calvin, Owen, Turretin, Bavinck, and many others. Such a conviction flows naturally from the belief that the canonical books are constituted by the Holy Spirit.⁷ As Richard Muller has noted, “There must be some evidence or imprint of the divine work of producing Scripture in the Scriptures themselves.”⁸

But what exactly is it about the content of these books that gives us good reasons to think they are from God? The Westminster Confession of Faith provides some clarity in this regard.

The heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby [Scripture] doth abundantly *evidence itself* to be the Word of God.⁹

Within the WCF, we can observe three categories of divine qualities: (1) the beauty and excellency of Scripture, (2) the efficacy and power of Scripture, and (3) the unity and harmony of Scripture. The first two qualities will be addressed briefly, and the bulk of this chapter will be spent on the third. Of course, we must not draw too sharp a distinction between these categories. In many ways they overlap and interact with one another.¹⁰

I. The Beauty and Excellency of Scripture

The first category to be noted here is that the canonical Scriptures bear evidence of their divine origins by their beauty, excellence, and perfection. As the WCF notes, the Scriptures stand out due to “the heavenliness of the matter...the majesty of the style...the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof.” In other words, the Scriptures, being from God, bear the very

⁵ For a fuller discussion, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), esp. 270-302; and John Owen, “The Divine Original: Authority, Self-Evidencing Light, and Power of the Scriptures,” in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 16, *The Church and the Bible*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 297-421.

⁶ Belgic Confession 5.2, emphasis mine.

⁷ Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 270-302; J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 115-25.

⁸ Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 270.

⁹ WCF 1.5, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ Obviously, part of the beauty and excellency of a book can be its harmony and unity or even its power and efficacy. Nonetheless, it is still helpful to distinguish between these categories.

attributes of God himself.¹¹ After all, how does a person know when he has encountered God? Does God need some external authority to confirm his identity? When men encounter God, they are vividly aware of his beauty, majesty, and perfection and need no further “evidence” that he is God (Pss. 27:4; 50:2; 96:6; Isa. 6:1-7; Rev. 1:12-17; 4:3). In addition, Scripture itself is described over and over again throughout the Bible as bearing these very same attributes. The psalmist declares of God’s word:

The law of the LORD is perfect. (19:7)

The commandment of the LORD is pure. (19:8)

How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth! (119:103)

Your testimonies are wonderful. (119:129)

Thus, one knows the Scriptures are from God because they bear the beauty and perfection of God.

It should be noted that the Confession’s understanding of the “majesty of the style” is not a reference to rhetorical or literary qualities that would appeal to modern man. The beauty of Scripture, then is a *spiritual* beauty, not just an aesthetic one. For this reason, Calvin acknowledges that the classics (Cicero, Plato, Aristotle) have rhetorical force, but that the Scripture “clearly is crammed with thoughts that could not be humanly conceived.”¹² As Paul himself says, “And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4-5).¹³ We are reminded, then, that the beauty and excellency of Scripture is primarily due to the manner in which it puts forth the beauty and excellency of Christ. G. C. Berkouwer observes, “The Spirit’s witness begins by binding us to the center of Scripture, namely Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ No doubt this is why the Confession considers one of the internal evidences of Scripture to be “the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation” (1.5).

We see this very approach evident in the early church fathers as they assessed the authority of the canonical books. For example, we read in the prologue to

¹¹ John M. Frame, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1990), 13-15; see also Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 297-315.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.8.2.

¹³ Origen appeals to this very passage in his defense of the quality of Scripture (*Cels.* 1.62).

¹⁴ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture*, trans. Jack Rogers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 44.

Jerome's commentary on Philemon that he defended the epistle on the grounds that it is "a document which has in it so much of the beauty of the Gospel," which is the "mark of its inspiration."¹⁵ Chrysostom declares that in the Gospel of John there is "nothing counterfeit" because the Gospel is "uttering a voice which is sweeter and more profitable than that of any harp or any music... something great and sublime."¹⁶ Origen defends the canonicity of the book of Jude because "it is filled with the healthful words of heavenly grace,"¹⁷ and he defends the canonical Gospels because of their "truly venerable and divine contents."¹⁸ Right before citing Matthew 4:17 and Philippians 4:5, Clement of Alexandria says that you can distinguish the words of men from the words of Scripture because "no one will be so impressed by the exhortations of any of the saints, as he is by the words of the Lord Himself."¹⁹ Origen defends the canonicity of the book of Hebrews on the ground that "the ideas of the epistle are magnificent."²⁰ Tatian explains, "I was led to put faith in these [Scriptures] by the unpretending cast of the language, the inartificial character of the writers, the foreknowledge displayed of future events, the excellent quality of the precepts."²¹

Even though we have been talking about how the "beauty and excellency" of Scripture leads to its acceptance, there is a parallel even within nonbiblical literature. Why is it that some secular writings are received with more popularity and regarded as classics, while others languish in obscurity? Is it always due to political pressures from the publisher, the shameless self-promotion of the author (or lack thereof), or some other *external* cause? No, sometimes it is a book's *internal qualities* that lead to its acceptance. Some books are just better than others. And the readers are quite able to notice the difference. Willie van Peer makes this case persuasively regarding the popularity of Shakespeare's 1593 version of *Romeo and Juliet*.²² An earlier version of the story – with the same general plot and characters, but a very different ethos and ending – was published by Arthur Brooke in 1562. Why did Shakespeare's version gain such universal appeal, while Brooke's has been almost entirely forgotten? It certainly

¹⁵ Prologue to *Comm. Phlm.*

¹⁶ *Hom. Jo.* 1.2.

¹⁷ *Comm. Matt.* 10:17.

¹⁸ *Cels.* 3.21.

¹⁹ *Protr.* 9.

²⁰ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6:25, 12, translation mine.

²¹ *Address to the Greeks*, 29. Although Tatian is referring here to the Old Testament Scriptures, we have no reason to think that he would not have ascribed these same qualities to the New Testament Scriptures. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 115, declares, "[Tatian's] *Diatessaron* supplies proof that all four Gospels were regarded as authoritative, otherwise it is unlikely that Tatian would have dared to combine them into one gospel account." See also R. M. Grant, "Tatian and the Bible," in *StPatr*, vol.1, = TU 63 (Berlin, 1957), 297-306; and K. L. Carroll, "Tatian's Influence on the Developing New Testament," in *Studies in the History and Text of the New Testament in Honor of Kenneth Willis Clark*, ed. B. L. Daniels and M. J. Suggs (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1967), 59-70.

²² Willie van Peer, "Canon Formation: Ideology or Aesthetic Quality?," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 97-108.

cannot be because Shakespeare's play fit with the political and moral climate that was dominant in Elizabethan England. On the contrary, Brooke's version was the one that upheld the dominant views of the day, and Shakespeare's was in many ways subversive to the status quo. In the end, it was the *content* of Shakespeare's work – and the way that content resonated with the masses – that led to its acceptance. Van Peer concludes that the Shakespeare example “falsifies the claim... that the canon is made up of only works that are in the interests of those in power.”²³

The reality that a book's own internal qualities might lead to its acceptance has also been observed by Old Testament scholars. While not acknowledging that Old Testament books possessed “divine qualities” in the way we have here, Shemaryahu Talmon still recognizes that the cause of their final acceptance was not official declarations of some authoritative body, but their popularity with the people.²⁴ Talmon declares, “There is no explicit or implicit statement in the Hebrew Scriptures which can give reason to think that in the biblical period a council of any kind, at any time, ever debated the establishment of a corpus of authoritative writings, or enacted the inclusion of a book in such a corpus.”²⁵ On the contrary, “public acclaim was the decisive factor”²⁶ in determining which books were in and which books were out. Simply put, “compositions which *earned* popular acclaim were transmitted.”²⁷

In these ways, we can see that a book's acceptance is not always a result of being chosen by the powers that be. Instead, a book often finds acceptance through a process not unlike the survival of the fittest.²⁸ The “strongest” books are the ones that prevail. In this way, a book really can choose itself.

II. The Power and Efficacy of Scripture

A second way the canonical Scripture testifies to itself is the way it functions in the life of the reader. Its divine origins are evident not only from what it says, but also from what it *does*. The teachings of Scripture prove to bring wisdom (Ps. 119:98; 2 Tim. 3:16), give joy to the heart (Neh. 8:8-12; Ps. 119:111), provide “light” to the dark paths of life (Ps. 119:105), give understanding to the mind (Ps. 119:144), give peace and comfort (Ps. 119:50), expose sin and guilt (2 Kings 22:11-13; Acts 2:34-37; Heb. 4:12-13), and lead to prosperity and blessing (Ps.

²³ Ibid., 107.

²⁴ S. Talmon, “The Crystallization of the ‘Canon of Hebrew Scriptures’ in the Light of the Biblical Scrolls from Qumran,” in *The Bible as Book: The Hebrew Bible and the Judaean Desert Discoveries*, ed. E. D. Herbert and E. Tov (London: The British Library, 2002), 5-20.

²⁵ Ibid., 9.

²⁶ Ibid., 10.

²⁷ Ibid., emphasis mine.

²⁸ C. D. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 226-29.

1:1-3). The WCF, cited above, refers to this particular line of internal evidence when it mentions "the efficacy of the doctrine." In other words, the teachings of Scripture not only bear the attributes of beauty and perfection (as noted above), but also prove to be powerful and effective. Paul Helm picks up on this same line of thought.

It is not simply that the Scriptures say that they are the revelation of God that is the evidence for their being so, but also that they *function* as the Word of God... One element [of Scripture functioning as the word of God] is the idea that the Bible purports to give an analysis or diagnosis of the reader.... Connected with this is the power of the Scriptures to raise and satisfy certain distinctive needs in the reader.... Connected with this is the displaying in Scripture of excellent moral standards.... And connected with this is the provision of new motivations to reach out for the newly set standards.²⁹

Of course, Helm's comments here are just a sampling of all that could be said about the efficacy and actions of Scripture.³⁰ The fundamental point to be realized here is that the Scriptures are powerful and dynamic, making an impact on the reader in a way that testifies to their distinctive origins and authority. As N. T. Wright has observed, "Those who read these writings discovered, from very early on, that the books themselves carried the same power, the same authority in action, that had characterized the initial preaching of the 'word.'"³¹

In the language of historical Reformed theology, this divine quality can be summed up by saying that the Scriptures are a "means of grace."³² Scriptures do more than pass along propositional information (as important as that is; they are "living and active ... piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow" (Heb. 4:12). Returning to our earlier discussion of speech-act theory, to say that the canon is a means of grace is to say that the canon, when attended by the Holy Spirit, has a perlocutionary effect; it changes, shapes, and transforms its reader or hearer. The canon is not something to be judged as much as it is the thing that does the judging. When this attribute of the canon is appreciated, once again, we can see how the canon is not so much shaped by the community of faith, but a means of shaping the community of faith. Or in the words of Martin Luther, "Ecclesia non facit Verbum sed fit Verbo."³³

²⁹ P. Helm, Faith, Evidence, and the Scriptures," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 310.

³⁰ Natalie B. Van Kirk, eds., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

³¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 145.

³² Westminster Larger Catechism, questions 155-60; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 610-15.

³³ Martin Luther, "The Misuse of the Mass," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. A. R. Wentz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 144-45: "The church does not constitute the word, but is constituted by the word."

Such a construal of canon is emphasized in the work of William Abraham, particularly his book *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*.³⁴ Abraham argues that much of modern Christendom has misunderstood the function of the canon by using it as a doctrinal norm—an epistemic criterion for determining true from false beliefs—when believers should have been using it as a means of grace that can transform people's lives. Abraham's concern that the canon not become just an instrument to arbitrate doctrinal disputes is a valid one; indeed it is one that Reformed theology (and its emphasis on the Word as a means of grace) has long affirmed. However, Abraham's helpful reminder goes further than it should when he insists that the canon functions only as a means of grace and not as a doctrinal norm. As Vanhoozer has noted, "Why must it be one or the other? Jesus was full of grace and truth (John 1:14) Doctrines direction serves both epistemic and pastoral purposes."³⁵ Abraham has rightly recognized an important reason why canonical books impacted the early church—because they were a powerful means of grace—but he fails to realize that the canonical books bear other divine attributes as well.³⁶

The early church fathers also recognized that the canonical books were distinctive because of their power and efficacy. Justin defends Christianity by declaring, "I shall prove to you as you stand here that we have not believed empty fables, or words without any foundation but words filled with the Spirit of God, and big with power, and flourishing with grace."³⁷ In addition, referring to the words of Christ, Justin says, "For they possess a terrible power in themselves, and are sufficient to inspire those who turn aside from the path of rectitude with awe; while the sweetest rest is afforded those who make a diligent practice of them."³⁸ In the *Apology of Aristides* (c. 130), the author invites the emperor to read "the Gospel" because "you also if you read therein, may perceive the power which belongs to it."³⁹ Clement of Alexandria reminds his listeners that transformation and sanctification come not by the words of men but by "those letters [of Scripture] that sanctify," and he proceeds to cite numerous New Testament books.⁴⁰ Irenaeus defends the fourfold Gospel on the grounds that these Gospels are always "breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh."⁴¹ Origen, defending the Gospels against the criticisms of Celsus, declares that the words of Jesus contained therein are "accompanied with divine

³⁴ William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); see also William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk, eds., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

³⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 145.

³⁶ For further critique of Abraham, see J. Webster, "Canon and Criterion: Some Reflections on a Recent Proposal," *SJT* 54 (2001): 67-83.

³⁷ Dial, 9.1.

³⁸ Dial, 8.2.

³⁹ 2.4 (Syriac).

⁴⁰ Protr. 9.

⁴¹ Haer. 3.11.8.

power" that transforms its hearers in regard to "their dispositions and their lives."⁴²

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⁴² *Cels.* 1.62.