

Bibliology : Canonicity Part 2: How do we know what belongs in the Bible? 3/27/22

Introduction:

- We are asking the question, “How do we know what is God’s word and what is not?” Which is to say, “What is canonical and what is not?”
- We cannot place any line of reasoning or evidence as the absolute adjudicator of canonicity, for that would be to place that particular reasoning or evidence as superior to God (and his word) in authority.
- Therefore, the Holy Spirit is the surest testimony of his own word.
- However, there are 3 attributes which assist us in recognizing the canon

Bible Attribute #1 for Determining Canonicity: The Divine Qualities of Scripture

- What does the content teach us?

Kruger: “Because the canonical books were constituted by the revelatory activity of the Holy Spirit, we would expect that there would be some evidence of that activity in the books themselves – the ‘imprint’ of the Spirit, if you will.”¹

Calvin: “It is easy to see that the sacred Scriptures, which so far surpass all gifts and graces of human endeavor, breathe something divine.”² “Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.”³

- The divine qualities are objectively present in Scripture.

This aspect of the self-authenticating model is not circular; it’s not merely that Scripture claims to be divine, therefore it must be divine.

It’s about divine qualities that are objectively present.

¹ Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 97.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville: WJK, 1960), 82.

³ Calvin, 76.

Analogous to general revelation: the creation itself testifies to the existence and character of its Creator. Similarly, special revelation (Scripture) testifies to its Author.

How can one discern from the creation that there is a Creator? (Order, Design, Provision, etc.).

If that is the case with general revelation/creation, then we would expect the same with special revelation/Scripture?

- By what means do we discern the divine qualities? And why do only the regenerate perceive these qualities?

Sin: we deny and suppress the truth in unrighteousness (cf. Rom. 1:18-21).

The Holy Spirit, in regeneration, awakens us to discern the things of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14-16); what would otherwise be “foolishness” to unregenerate man.

We need the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit which is the means by which we perceive these qualities.

William Barrick: The only true test of canonicity is the testimony of God the Holy Spirit to the authority of His own Word.

The Spirit overcomes the effects of sin and produces belief within us consequent of regeneration/the new birth (John 3).

Bavinck: “We believe Scripture, not because of, but by means of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.”⁴

- This is where our self-authenticating model is different from Mormonism, for example.

Mormonism, in general, attempts to discern objective truth through a subjective experience.

⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 598.

The Holy Spirit, however, opens eyes to perceive objective qualities that are present in the text.

Calvin: “They mock the Holy Spirit when they ask: ‘Who can convince us that these writings came from God?’”⁵

- The attributes of Scripture which we perceive by the Holy Spirit:
 - a. Beauty and Excellency**
 - i. Psalm 19:7 “The law of the Lord is perfect”
 - ii. Psalms 119:103 “How sweet are your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth”
 - iii. Psalm 119:129 “Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul observes them”
 - b. Power and Efficacy**
 - i. Hebrews 4:12 “living and active; sharper than any two-edged sword... able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart”
 - ii. Exposes sin and guilt (2 Kings 22:11-13, Acts 2:34-37, Heb. 4:12-13)
 - iii. Gives joy to the heart (Neh 8:8-12, Ps 119:111)
 - iv. Brings wisdom (Ps 119:98, 2 Tim 3:16)
 - v. Gives understanding (Ps 119:144)
 - vi. Gives peace and comfort (Ps 119:50)
 - c. Unity and Harmony**
 - i. God cannot lie (Ps 89:35, Titus 1:2) or change (Heb. 13:8), so his word must confirm itself (be consistent and never contradicting)
 - ii. Acts 17 - the Bereans putting checking Paul’s teaching to see if it was consistent with what the OT taught. They believed that God’s word would evidence unity and harmony.
 - iii. The 66 books, 40 different authors (from varying demographics), over 1500 years,

⁵ Calvin, 75.

giving one unified message of God's redemptive history and plan.

iv. **Kruger:** "When one considers the vastness of the Scripture, the variety of authors, the diversity and complexity of topics, and different geographical locations, backgrounds, and time periods – combined with the fact that the canon was not assembled by a single individual or group who could have imposed such unity – it becomes all the more noteworthy that there is such remarkable theological harmony throughout these books."⁶

- Any Christian can have assurance that Scripture is inspired by God and the 66 books comprise the canon
- How do you have assurance? By embracing Christ by faith, regenerated by the Spirit, you hear his voice...
- Which leads to our next attribute of canonicity, which is corporate reception....

Bible Attribute #2 for Determining Canonicity: Corporate Reception

1. If the divine qualities of Scripture and the testimony of the Spirit can reliably lead an *individual* to belief in the canon, then we should expect it to be true on a corporate level as well.
2. In fact, it should be even more evident on a corporate level because we are not called to live our lives alone, apart from the community of believers. The Holy Spirit works in us on a corporate level as well as an individual level.
3. **Kruger:** "The books received by the church inform our understanding of which books are canonical not because the church is infallible or because it created or constituted the canon, but because the church's reception of these books is a natural and inevitable outworking of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture."⁷

⁶ Kruger, 142.

⁷ Kruger, 106.

4. Thus, the church is not authoritatively determining which books belong in the canon. Quite the contrary: the authority of the canon (being the word of God) is demanding a response from the church; from those regenerate by the Holy Spirit.

Kruger: "Thus, when the canon is understood as self-authenticating, it is clear that the church did not choose the canon, but the canon, in a sense, chose itself."⁸

Analogy: the church is more like a thermometer than a thermostat. They both tell you something about the temperature of the room. But one *determines* the temperature while the other *responds* to it. In the same way, the church doesn't determine the canon, it responds to it. It reflects what the true canon is.

5. **Objection:** early disagreements over the canon (what should be in the Bible) in early Christianity, implies that the church has incorrectly recognized the canon.

Response:

- The question assumes that if God really did give us books, then there would have been immediate universal agreement on them. There would have perfect unity from the beginning with no disagreements whatsoever.
- Scripture gives us good reason to expect that the corporate recognition of the canon would take time

(1) God chose to give the books through normal historical means. Many different authors with many different backgrounds spread out over a long period of time, requiring time for exposure and recognition to occur.

(2) Sin is still present in the church. Tares exist among the wheat. Unregenerate or sinning individuals clouds the ability to hear the Shepherd's voice from Scripture.

⁸ Kruger, 106.

(3) False teachers infiltrate the church.

(4) Spiritual opposition. As he did in Genesis 3, Satan likely has, and will, induce doubt over the canon.

Thus, some delay and disagreement over the canon is expected.

- The diversity of early Christianity is overstated:

Critics tend to identify isolated examples of canon dispute in early Christianity.

We can identify a canonical core very early in church history, as early as the beginning of the 2nd century, not long after Revelation was written.

Excursus: Rise and Recognition of the NT Canon in History

****Recall:** History, however, is not the absolute determiner of canonicity. It is not historical events that determined canonicity. If that is the case, then history would be superior in authority to Scripture.

1. Influences leading to the recognition of the New Testament canon in the early church.

- **Existence of the Old Testament:** The OT became a pattern which the early church would follow to formulate its own canon
- **The authoritative character of the NT writings:** The words of Christ had the same authority as the OT
- **Christian writings used in public services:** Christians used to read scripture during services (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; Rev. 1:3)
- **The place of NT writings in doctrinal controversies:** Heretics like the Gnostics marked out books they thought should be in the canon, this causes the true church to do the same
- **The Canon of Marcion:** In A.D. 140 a heretic called Marcion published his own list of authoritative books
- **Persecution of Emperor Diocletian:** In 303 he declared himself as god and commanded all books to be burned, this helped the Christians to decide what was canonical and what was not
- **Eusebius under Emperor Constantine:** he was asked by Constantine to make 50 copies of the NT when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire
- **The Technical development permitting the manufacture of large codices:** These large codices were able to contain all 27 books

2. The Rise of the New Testament Writings

- New Testament Writings Consist of
 - 27 books
 - 8 or 9 authors
 - 4 gospels
 - 1 history
 - 21 epistles
 - 1 apocalypse
 - Date from approximately A.D. 45 - 95

- First 15 years no authoritative writings (roughly AD 30-45)
 - Only by word of mouth (oral)
 - Doctrinal issues created the need for written documents

- Gospels appeared
 - Matthew late 50's
 - Luke 60's
 - Mark late 60's
 - John late 80's
 - Acts in A.D. 62 or 63
 - Revelation A.D. late 80's/early 90's

3. The church's recognition of the canon during the period A.D. 70 - 170

- Persecution severe during this time
- Gradual Collection
 - System of communication was poor
 - In the beginning oral testimony of the apostles was preferred
- Clement of Rome (30 - 100 A.D.)
 - Pastor in the church of Rome
 - He attributed authority to the New Testament as well as the Old Testament
 - He attributed authority to the Apostles as well as to Christ because he appointed them
- Didache - or the Teaching of the Twelve (early Christian ethical and theological teaching)
 - This book explicitly uses Matthew and Luke and shows familiarity with most of the New Testament books
- Epistle of Barnabas
 - This epistle wrestles with continuity and discontinuity between Old and New Testaments
- Problems interpreting the Old Testament
 - They wanted a complimentary body of literature

- Ignatius of Antioch
 - Overseer in the church of Antioch
 - In his 7 letters prior to his death he advocated the NT
 - Christian prophets needed to be heard
 - He believed that Jesus Christ was the full revelation of God
 - He had familiarity to Paul's epistles
- Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (110 A.D.)
 - He was a scholar familiar with the New Testament
 - He combined Ps. 4:4 with Eph 4:26
- Summary
 - Authority of the Apostles was accepted as equal to the Old Testament
 - The gospels and Paul's letters were accepted as part of the canon
 - Every book minus 2 Peter was noticed

4. The church's recognition of the canon during 170 - 303 A.D.

- Persecution severe during this time
- Separation of canonical books from the mass of ecclesiastical literature
- Muratorian fragments or canon
 - 170 A.D.
 - This is a response to Marcion
 - This book includes a list of authoritative books
 - Includes 21 or 22 books out of 27
 - Minus
 - Hebrews
 - James
 - 1 and 2 Peter
- Three influential leaders + two other influential men
 - Irenaues
 - Disciple of Polycarp and Bishop of Lyons, Gaul
 - "Against Heresies" - he quotes many NT books and not many from the OT
 - He uses 21 of the 27 books from the NT
 - Tertullian
 - Validates 22 books
 - Except
 - Hebrews
 - James
 - 2 Peter
 - 2 and 3 John
- Clement of Alexandria
 - Validates 24 books
 - Except

- James
 - 2 Peter
 - 3 John

 - Roman elder Hippoclytes
 - Validates 23 books
 - Except
 - Philemon
 - Hebrews
 - 2 and 3 John
 - Jude

 - Origen
 - Devoted his life to the study of scripture
 - Devoted his life to Canonicity
- 5. The church's recognition of the canon during the period A.D. 303-397.**
- This period marked the formal ratification of current beliefs.
 - Eusebius of Caesarea (270-340 AD) Bishop of Caesarea.
 - 313 A.D. Constantine legalized Christianity and made it the official religion of Rome
 - *Church History* - Eusebius devotes much space about what should be in the Canon.
 - Divided Christian writing into 3 books:
 - Acknowledged Present 27
 - except
 - James
 - 2 Peter
 - 2 and 3 John
 - Jude
 - possibly Revelation
 - disputed
 - Group one
 - James
 - 2 peter
 - 2 and 3 John
 - Jude
 - group 2
 - Shepherd of Hermes
 - Epistles of Barnabas
 - possibly Revelation
 - heretical
 - Contrary to accepted orthodox doctrine

- Athanasius- Completed the task started by Eusebius with defining the NT canon
- Works like Codex Sinaiticus (350 AD) contained all 27 books of the NT, indicating widespread recognition of the canon.
- Council of Laodicea (363 AD) - earliest council to recognize the Canon.
 - Small gathering of clergy from Lydia and Phrygia (363 AD).
 - Findings did not list of books that make up the Canon.
- Council of Hippo (393) - Records have been lost.
- Council of Carthage (397) - Recognition were reaffirmed
- Council of Carthage (419) - Augustine presided over this.

Summary:

- The 4 gospels, majority of Paul's epistles, and several other books were never seriously disputed (which contain essential Christian doctrine).
- The disputes pertained to smaller, lesser known books (2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude).
- Took time for them to gain widespread recognition in the church.

Bible Attribute #3 for Determining Canonicity: Apostolic Origins

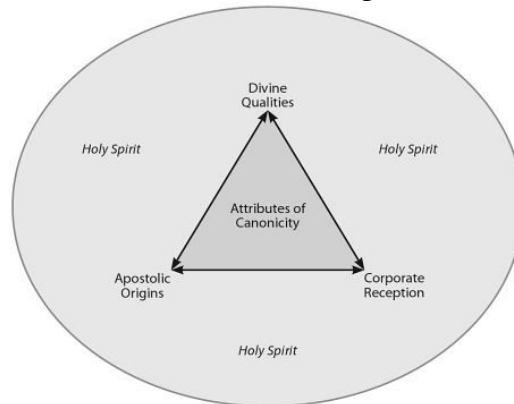
1. Apostles commissioned by the authority of Christ and entrusted with delivering the gospel to the world.
2. The Holy Spirit guided them into truth, empowering them to testify inerrantly in Scripture (John 14:26, 15:26-27, 16:13).
3. This is affirmed throughout the NT.
 - a. **2 Cor 3:6** - "ministers of the new covenant"
 - b. **Acts 10:41-42** - "witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God...to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead."
 - c. **2 Peter 3:2** - "remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles."

4. **Kruger:** “[The NT books] are the outworking of the authority Christ gave to his apostles to lay down the permanent foundation for the church.”⁹
 5. So, it should be clear that part of the guidance that we receive from Scripture in order to authenticate Scripture is to look for apostolic truth.
 6. History’s proper role: the approach is not to prove Scripture using history, but applying Scripture using history. Scripture testifies that the Apostles were used in history for inspiration/bringing the canon.
 7. We have very few non-apostolic works from the time concurrent to the Apostles. The most popular would be a letter known as 1 Clement, but that letter is just barely within the first century, likely written just after Revelation.
- We have these 3 attributes of canonicity then: divine qualities, corporate reception, and apostolic origins. How do they work together?
- **The attributes of the self-authenticating model imply and confirm one another**
 - These attributes are bound together and cannot be separated
 - Each of the attributes implies the other two attributes
 - If a book bears divine qualities, which would imply that it contains apostolic teaching, which would imply the church should properly recognize it by the power of the Spirit.
 - And, if the church receives it, then that implies that the book contains divine qualities and that it contains apostolic teaching.
 - Each of the attributes confirms the other two
 - Divine qualities and corporate reception are part of the way we know that a book has apostolic origins.
 - The self-authenticating model is self-supporting and self-correcting

⁹ Kruger, 109-110.

- An individual may not perceive the divine qualities of a certain book (Martin Luther questioned James), but his view is corrected by the apostolic origins and the corporate reception of the church.

The Self-Authenticating Model¹⁰



- Nowhere in Scripture is there any suggestion that any canon outside of Scripture itself should be used to judge the canon.
- *The canon as the fruit of divine inspiration, not the result of human decisions. ... Because the writings of the apostles and prophets were canonical by virtue of their intrinsic quality, the canon, in principle, existed from the time these books were written; and it was added to with successive appearances of new inspired works. It happened that the church was a long time in expressing its unanimous acknowledgment of certain of the writings; but when it finally came to it, all it did was bow in recognition of that which already existed.*¹¹

Cf. the inner witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:15-16; 1 Cor 2:4-11; 1 Thess 1:5).

The Scriptures are canonical because they have been uniquely bound to Christ and sanctified by God as the instrument of his ongoing self-revelation to men and lordship over the Church, and because they are thus employed by God in a manner that has called forth the recognition of the Church.¹²

¹⁰ Figure from Kruger, 118.

¹¹ Pache, *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*, 161.

¹² Farrow, *The Word of Truth and Disputes About Words*, 154-55.

1. The Old Testament Canon

- a. In principle, the OT could be authenticated in the same way as the NT.
 - Books bore divine qualities, they came through God-ordained channels (prophets), and God’s people received them as the word of God.

- b. Living 2000 years later, we have the advantage of looking back to see what Jesus and the Apostles believed and taught in the context of their own Jewish culture.

- c. Do we have the same canon that Jesus did?

- d. Brief biblical evidence:
 - Jesus affirmed the first-century Jewish canon, which is identical to our Old Testament canon.
 - The NT contains no hint that the Jews had an incorrect canon.
 - This is obvious when we see that he and his followers regularly address non-Christian Jews by appealing to a text that both sides apparently had in common.
 - a. These are not believers being addressed in the these passages, these are Jews, and the subject of canon is never under dispute:
 - b. Jesus (Matt 21:16; Mark 7:6-13, 11:17, 12:10, 12:24; John 5:39, 6:45, 10:34, 15:25, etc.)
 - c. Paul (Acts 17:2, 17:11, 28:23, 24:24, 26:22)
 - d. Peter (Acts 2:16-21, 25-31)
 - e. Apollos (Acts 18:28)
 - f. Stephen (Acts 7:42, 48-50)
 - Jesus endorses the three-fold structure of the OT that the Jews observed
 - The Law (Pentateuch), the Prophets (major and minor prophets), and the Writings (historical books).
 - Luke 24:44 - “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms”
 - Matt 23:35, Luke 11:51 - “from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah”
 - a. Jesus refers to the first and last martyrs of the OT, not in a chronological sense, but according to the traditional order of the OT books (the Jewish canon ended with Chronicles, and Zechariah is the last martyr in Chronicles). (Gen 4:3-15, 2 Chron 24:19-22)

b. This tells us that Jesus accepted the order of the Jewish canon

- Other historical evidence: It was widely accepted that there were 22 books in the Jewish canon (or 24 if Ruth and Lamentations are attached to Judges and Jeremiah, respectively)
 - So the fact there was a widely accepted number indicates that the canon was settled.

2. Is the Canon Closed?

a. Scripture explicitly warns us against adding to the Word of God

- Rev 22:18-19: “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.”
 - This doesn’t necessarily end the discussion about the closing of the canon because there are other warnings like this throughout scripture, going all the way back to Deuteronomy (Deut. 4:2, 12:32, Proverbs 30:6)
 - However, such a warning concluding the NT is telling.

b. **Frame:** “In one sense, the canon is always closed. God forbids people to add to or subtract from it....We are to be satisfied with what God has given us, and not long for more. In every age, God has given his people all the written words we need to live faithfully before him.”¹³

c. Only God can add to the canon. Will he? The canon is closed:

i. The NT is God’s final word

- Jesus is the final and complete revelation of God
- *Only* the Apostles were commissioned to authoritatively testify about Christ.
- Heb. 1:1-2: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.”

¹³ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010), 138.

Grudem: “The exceptional greatness of the revelation that comes through the Son, far exceeding any revelation in the old covenant, is emphasized again and again throughout chapters 1 and 2 of Hebrews. These facts all indicate that there is a finality to the revelation of God in Christ and that once this revelation has been completed, no more is to be expected.”¹⁴

Frame: “As the redemptive work of Christ is once for all, so the word of Christ and apostles is once for all. For God to add more books to the canon would be like adding something to the work of Christ, something that Scripture teaches cannot be done.”¹⁵

- The entire NT is one deposit of revelation centered on the person and work of Christ, and that deposit was delivered by the Holy Spirit through apostles.

Jude 3 – “faith once for all delivered to the saints.” Refers to a body of truth – God’s intention to communicate a body of truth. Jude written about AD 72.

- Since the apostolic office ceased in the first century, we should expect no additional revelation.

d. God’s redemptive story is complete.

- Revelation is the perfect ending. Read the first 3 chapters of Genesis and the last 3 chapters of Revelation in one sitting. God ties up the “loose ends” at the end.

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids: IVP; Zondervan, 1994), 64.

¹⁵ Frame, 139.

Genesis begins with:	Revelation ends with:
Creation of the “heavens and earth” (1:1)	Re-creation and the new “heaven and earth” (21:1)
Creation of day, night, and sea (1:3, 10, 14)	No more need for day (sun), night, or sea (21:1, 22:5)
Paradise in the garden (2:8ff)	Paradise in heaven (21:4)
Theme of marriage (2:8)	Great wedding of the Lamb (21:9)
The serpent’s deception (3:1ff)	The serpent’s destruction (20:10)
The curse being put upon the world (3:14ff)	The curse being lifted (22:3)
The “tree of life” among the people of God (2:9)	The “tree of life” among the people of God (22:2)
God dwelling with his people (2:8, 3:8)	God finally dwelling with his people again (21:3)

- The OT concludes, leaves us wondering. The NT concludes, leaves us praising:
 - Where is the seed (Gen 3:15) who will crush the serpent?
 - Who’s the one to reign forever on the throne of David?
 - Is mankind doomed to repeat an endless cycle of animal sacrifices for all eternity?
 - It leaves mankind looking forward to more, to expect the arrival of the Messiah at some point.
 - But the NT leaves us only looking forward to the triumphant return of Christ.
- e. The early church believed the canon was closed.
- Muratorian fragment rejected the very popular work “Shepherd of Hermas” because it was written “very recently, in our own times.”
 - So as early as the 2nd century, the church did not consider the canon to be open.
 - The early church recognized the close of the canon with the death of the Apostles.
 - Plenty of church fathers could be quoted as well for evidence that the trend in the early church was to restrict any additions to the canon beyond was written by the apostles and their close associates.¹⁶
- f. When was it closed?
- Many argue for the 4th century.

¹⁶ Kruger, 282ff.

- But this view only considers the human perspective on the canon.
- God closed the canon with the conclusion of inspiration.

Kruger: “The church cannot close the canon because it never started it to begin with.”¹⁷

- **The canon closes when God ceases his act of inspiration.**

g. What Council Determined What Would Be in the Bible?

Because of God’s act of inspiration, the only Council which determined what would be in the canon and what would not, was the counsel of God.

God inspires the canon by his Holy Spirit. In God’s providence, regenerate man recognizes the canon by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

“The church no more gave us the NT canon that Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity, by His work of creation, and similarly He gave us the NT canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up.” (James Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (London: Hodden and Stoughton, 1965), p. 81).

“Though the history of the recognition, review, and ratification of the canon was somewhat complicated...what should be emphasized...is that not because the church, upon a certain date, long ago, made an official decision, do these books constitute the inspired Bible; on the contrary, the 66 books, by their very contents, immediately attest themselves to the hearts of all Spirit-indwelt men as being the living oracles of God.” (William Hendriksen, *First and Second Timothy and Titus, New Testament Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), pp. 301-2).

Conclusion - “How do we know what belongs in the Bible?”

- John 10:27 - “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”
- The Chief Shepherd has shed his blood for us, rendering us in the right with God by simple faith in him. The gift of the Holy Spirit enables us to hear our Lord’s voice.
- This is the voice that we have been studying in our Bibliology series.
- The doctrine of Scripture is a study in the voice of the Chief Shepherd.

¹⁷ Kruger, 280.