

## The Trustworthy Word, Week 34

### The Divine Qualities of the Canon

We're talking about a self-authenticating canon, and the general outline for our study ahead:

1. The Divine Qualities of Scripture
2. The Corporate Reception of the Scriptures
3. The Apostolic Origins of the Scriptures
4. Hard Questions About Canonicity

This morning I want to introduce this idea of the divine qualities of the canon. We'll explore this in more detail in the weeks ahead – though next Sunday we have a guest speaker from the mission team that will be with us this week.

“The divine qualities of Scripture are the least discussed in modern canonical studies.” (Kruger 125). Even some really good Christian apologetics books don't talk about this aspect of canonicity.

I suspect that one of the problems is that people feel like there is something circular about using what the Bible says to argue for the canon. If you don't know what the Bible is, how can you use the Bible to prove it?

But suppose I'm a music historian and a huge fan of Mozart, and I want to prove to you that Mozart wrote a certain piece of music. But you say to me, “Okay, you can use any kind of evidence you want, but you can't use any evidence from the piece of music itself. Don't show me anything about how amazing the music is.” That doesn't make any sense.

If the canon is from God, and if God is amazing – which would seem to be part of being god – then we would expect the books from God to be amazing, or at least to exceed other human literature.

If the canon is from God, then it most certainly will have divine qualities. As a matter of fact, this will be *the most important* distinguishing factor. And it's not circular reasoning to discuss those divine qualities. This is how the Bible authenticates itself.

Now let me make two important clarifications:

1. First, when we say “Divine qualities” we don't mean that the Bible is a book that seems like it came from aliens, because it's so strangely unusual. God used human writers in real human situations using regular human genres of literature. So in many ways the Bible is very human because of human authors writing in the midst of human history using human genres. But, by divine qualities we mean that it rises above anything that humans on their own could write, and actually reflects the greatness of God.
2. Second, someone could say, “People in all sorts of religions believe that their scriptures have divine qualities. So how does that help us?”
  - a. First of all, remember that we don't expect unsaved people to recognize the divine qualities of Scripture. They are more likely to see divine qualities in the work of

the latest popular rapper. The things of God will be foolishness to them, unless the Spirit of God is at work bringing them to salvation.

- b. But also, please realize that just because lots of people think they have divine religious books should not silence you from telling others why you believe the Bible is uniquely amazing.

Suppose Pastor Eric has a really remarkable piece of music by Mozart, and he says to me, “I have this amazing piece of music by Mozart, and I want to tell you about it.” Suppose I reply, “Well, I have a really amazing piece of music by Kristalyn when she took music theory in college.” Should Pastor Eric reply, “Oh, well never mind then. You think that piece of music is great, I think this piece of music is great. There’s no use talking about it.”

Don’t you think chances are pretty good that if we compare Mozart with the work of your average college music student, Mozart will shine?

And so in the same way, if you say, “The Bible has divine qualities that prove it is from God” and someone else says, “The Book of Mormon has divine qualities too, because after I read it I just knew it was from God,” you should not say, “Oh, never mind them.” You should say “Okay, let’s talk about it. You share some of the characteristics of the Book of Mormon that convince you that it must be from God. And I’ll share some of the reasons why I believe that about the Bible.”

Then tell them about some of the incredible divine qualities of Scripture. Because the thing is, their statement that the Book of Mormon is a true testimony of Jesus Christ is based on a feeling they got when they read it. So when you share with them about true divine qualities, God might use that.

Now, in the weeks ahead I want to show you some of the arguments for the divine qualities of the canon. But to get us started, I want to share a simple version of my own testimony about this.

When I started to read Michael Kruger’s section on the Divine Qualities of the Canon, I stopped right at the beginning, and said, “Wait, I want to answer this question myself. For about 20 years I’ve spent much of my time studying the Bible. So am I convinced that the Bible has divine qualities? What would I say on my own?”

To make it even more personal, I guess you could say that if you set aside my role as a pastor, you have to remember that I’m still just an individual human being who has to decide whether I believe the Bible and will follow Jesus. So do I as an individual believe that the Bible has divine qualities? Enough to compel me to spend my life as a follower of Jesus?

There are many reasons why I believe in Jesus, trust Him as my Savior and King, and follow Him with my life. But what’s especially relevant this morning is that if you pushed me really hard about the reasons why I am a follower of Jesus, and insisted that I give you one bottom-line reason why I believe I must be a follower of Jesus, my answer would be...

Well, don't answer out loud, but in your own heart, what first comes to mind for you? What is the most convincing reason for you as to why you must be a follower of Jesus?

Some Christians would emphasize that the historical evidence for the resurrection is so strong, and so they believe Jesus must be who he claimed to be; others would say that they had a miraculous spiritual experience, that convinced them this is true; others might point to the changes in their life that occurred after salvation; or to the love of God for them; others might point to evidences from history or archaeology.

But if you asked me for one bottom line reason why I must believe the Bible and follow Jesus, my answer would be, "because I believe that the Bible cannot possibly be a human book." That's not my only answer, but if you made me give only one, that would be it. Based on the evidence in the Bible, I believe that it cannot possibly be a purely human book. I believe it has to be what it claims to be, and that is a revelation of God.

I don't think I say that out of naïve sentimentality or wishful thinking. My job for many hours each week is to scrutinize the Bible, to dig deep, to examine the connections, to address the hardest questions, and to push the Bible to stand up to the hardest issues of humanity. Whether that is dealing with diseases and death in the hospital, or teaching evangelism and apologetics, or preparing for a seminar on stress, or teaching a topic like alcohol, or counseling broken marriages, I am not just playing around with the Bible. I have to apply the Bible to the very hardest topics and issues facing humanity.

And so when I say, "I believe that the Bible cannot possibly be a human book," that is a deeply-held personal conviction that has been forged as I've watched the Bible stand up to the heat for the past 20 years.

So as a matter of personal testimony, let me briefly share a few of the divine qualities of the Bible that are especially relevant to me. We'll come back to these later, and this is not a complete list, it's just a personal list of those things that are most deeply convincing for me:

### **1. Naturalness.**

I mean that the Bible has all of these divine qualities, yet they are clothed in a remarkable naturalness, which is just what we would expect from real human writers. Often times, other religious writings try to sound like the Bible. Their divine qualities seem forced, and to me, the Bible never seems forced, as if it's trying to be Scripture. It just is, which is what we would expect if the Bible is from God.

### **2. Realism.**

Religious books – or self-help books – tend to have a problem with realism. The Bible is so real that it hurts. Real about the brokenness of this world. You'd expect the Bible to gloss it over. The Bible begins with "In the beginning God created." So wouldn't God be motivated to try to gloss over the problems in the world He created? But instead, I personally believe that you will not

find a piece of religious literature that is as thoroughly realistic as the Bible. It faces the reality of human brokenness head on.

### **3. A coherent and thorough worldview.**

In combination with its realism, I believe that the Bible provides the best explanation of the real world in which we live. The best explanation of the existence of creation; the best explanation of the staggering complexity of the human body, and this planet perfectly tuned to sustain human life; the best explanation of the good that we see in people, the remarkable care and resilience and capabilities of humanity; the best explanation of what has gone terribly wrong with humanity, and the horrific realities of this world; and the best explanation of the solution.

And again, I don't say this naively. Just this week I've spent more time than I wanted listening to completely evolutionary, materialistic worldviews. And they come up so short or providing a thorough worldview. Let me share just one quote to illustrate this, this is a quote I'll use in the stress seminar on Saturday. This comes from a book about stress by a scientist who is by his own testimony an atheist who believes religion is destructive. At one point in his book he says "Something is still missing. Perhaps we can even risk scientific credibility and detachment and mention the word *love* here..." (Robert M. Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, Third Edition, 116)

From the biblical worldview, you don't have to risk credibility to talk about love. It's right at the heart of the biblical worldview. I believe that competing worldviews cannot match the coherence and thoroughness of the biblical worldview. Not to mention the fact that only the biblical worldview ends up giving true hope.

### **4. Universal message.**

If you've watched any of the Dispatches from the Front videos, think of what we've seen there: the same basic gospel message that you and I love; the same Scriptures, the same worldview, at work in an entirely different cultural setting. China, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Albania. There is this perception that Christianity is an old white male western European thing, yet that is factually absurd. Christianity is diminishing in the old white West and flourishing among young women and men in South America, Africa, and Asia. It doesn't matter if you're in the concrete jungle of Manhattan or the jungle of Indonesia, the same Bible is hitting home, creating Christian communities of love, and prompting change in places where there is no Christian government supporting it, no tradition to make it easy and natural, no coercion, as a matter of fact quite the opposite. In places of great opposition to Christianity, in cultures that are very much unlike the white West, there Christianity is flourishing. The universal message of the Bible is just what I would expect from a book authored by mankind's creator.

### **5. Historical credibility.**

I know there are still some hard questions, and some areas in which secular scholars especially would suggest that the Bible and ancient history don't jive. This is especially true as we get way back into ancient history where the history itself is pretty fuzzy. But in the bigger picture, the

Bible has withstood an incredible amount of historical scrutiny. In so many instances, the skeptics said, “Aha, the Bible is wrong,” only to discover evidence later that the Bible was right. It’s happened over and over again.

Just last month the Associated Press reported “that Israeli mathematicians and archaeologists say they have found evidence to suggest that key biblical texts may have been composed earlier than what some scholars think.” Scholars love to suggest that the biblical writings must have been written much later than they claim. This is partly because of the troublesome little issue of fulfilled prophecies. If the Bible was written when it claims to have been written, then it is indisputably from God. The historical fulfillments of internal prophecies are too clear. So scholars always try to say the things were written later, but sometimes the facts get in the way of what they want to be true.

There are certainly many human books with historical credibility, but the Bible is an especially unusual book to have such credibility. If the Bible was a purely human invention, some type of religious tool created across the centuries, it is hard to imagine how it could maintain such a rigorous degree of historical credibility. It seems that there is something more than human going on.

<http://bigstory.ap.org/1409f25101b04492b9695990be062c2a>

## **6. Simplicity and complexity.**

If we use the illustration of a tapestry: imagine a tapestry that is made up of individual threads that are so beautiful that they are like individual works of art; and tens of thousands of them are combined into a tapestry that as a whole is stunning. The Bible is like that: it is full of short sentences and even phrases that stand on their own and powerfully reach right into my heart. They can reach into the heart of the simplest person in a remote and rural part of the world who has never had the opportunity for any education. At the same time, the Bible is so much more than a collection of short sayings. There is a big picture that weaves everything together in a single tapestry. The beautiful simplicity of the single threads; the stunning complexity of ten thousand threads perfectly woven together. It’s hard for me to fathom a human being doing that on his own – much less dozens of human beings across many generations.

That brings me to:

## **7. Cohesiveness and interconnectivity.**

The hardest challenges for any Bible teacher are the things in the Bible that seem to be unique to one particular passage. You come across a key word or theme that seems to only show up in this one place, without other connections in Scripture to help flesh out the meaning more fully. In those places, we often have to say, “We don’t know. We only have what the Bible tells us here in this one place.” But after teaching the Bible extensively for many years, what amazes me is that in the 1,000+ pages of the Bible, that very rarely happens.

From my limited experience, for every one time I come across a particular word, phrase, or verse that doesn't have many other connections in Scripture, I've come across 99 other words or phrases or verses that do connect all over the Bible.

As I've been working this year to enter my old sermons into my Bible software, I've had the joy of remembering some of the things I've had the privilege of studying and teaching in the past. In so many cases, the series ended up longer than I thought they would be, because the biblical connections just kept going. Take a theme like atonement, which shows up in the Old Covenant law, and trace it through Scripture. Start with the birth of Jesus, and the glory of the Lord appearing to the shepherds, and trace that through the Scriptures to see the amazing connections. When Jesus hangs on the cross, hear him say "My God, why have you forsaken me" – then watch that theme of forsaking unfold in the rest of the Bible. You could preach a year's worth of sermons on each of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit, or each section of the Lord's prayer, or each one of the beatitudes. And you'd still have to be trimming it down!

One of the most exciting experiences I've had in this regard happened as I worked on writing the Restore Study last year. First of all, I started with this idea of restoration. It seemed like such a great metaphor to illustrate what God promises to do with our broken lives. But did it occur broadly enough in Scripture? As I started to explore, that theme showed up in all sorts of places, especially in the Old Testament prophets. Then I struggled a little bit with whether this was just an Old Covenant theme, or could I rightfully apply this to the New Covenant? Well, it turns out that there are these two beautiful statements in the book of Acts that take the Old Testament promises of restoration and apply them to all of us because of Jesus. Then there are all of the other synonyms to restoration.

So I had a theme: then I needed a structure to organize the content. I thought that Isaiah 9:6-7 might be a good basic outline, because it describes the characteristics of the One whom God would send to restore all things. Ultimately this points to Jesus, who is the Mighty God, Righteous King, Suffering Savior, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor. Now each one of those themes connects all over the Bible – as a matter of fact, I just limited it to the Old Testament prophets, and still struggled greatly to trim it down to just 500 key passages.

To take one example, Isaiah 9:6 uses the word "Wonderful" to describe Jesus as "Wonderful Counselor." From my opinion one of the most exciting parts of the Restore Study is the section that you reach, late in the course, where you study that word "wonderful" and all of its rich connections in Scripture.

To return to our tapestry illustration, it's as if you have the beautiful individual strands; and you have the beautiful tapestry; but then as you look closely there are all of these sub-tapestries that are just as beautiful on their own. And the closer you look, the more of them you see.

So I'm calling this cohesiveness and interconnectivity, and again I am impressed that this happens across many genres of literature written across many centuries. I cannot personally fathom how this could be any sort of human accomplishment. Even if the Bible was written by a group of people who all lived at the same time, and planned the Bible together, I don't believe

any group of humans could have pulled off anything like this. And of course there is plenty of historical evidence that the Bible came from a widely varying group of people who lived in different places across many centuries.

There is no human literature that comes close.

## **8. Depth.**

There is a depth to the Bible that just keeps going. Let me comment on this in three ways:

First, I observe this myself every week, as illustrated by the simple fact that I wish every sermon could be 3 hours long instead of 45 minutes. No matter what we're studying, it seems that the Bible says so much more that could be explored and explained and illustrated and applied more. A 45-minute sermon always seems to just scratch the surface. So this convinces me that there is a superhuman depth to the Bible.

Beyond that, I can also say that though I am still just a young kid of a pastor, in 20 years of having Bible study as a central focus of my life, I can testify that I'm just beginning to scratch the surface. At this point in my life and ministry, what drives me crazy is how much more I want to learn. The exploration of the Bible and its 1,000 pages is more exciting and compelling for me today than it was for me as an eager college student 20 years ago. There is a superhuman depth in this book.

Finally, I have observed that older pastors, like my dad, find that the Bible has an inexhaustible depth that continues to excite them after 4 or 5 or 6 decades of studying and teaching it. They can still discover new things that make them want to leap for joy, if their aging body could still leap.

I am convinced no human book can match its depth.

## **9. Sustaining power through anything.**

I have observed, from watching other followers of Jesus, that when the Bible is consistently and carefully applied to the heart, it has the power to remarkably sustain a person through any life circumstances. People who deeply and humbly love the Bible are the most stable people I know, even when their lives are incredibly unstable. Their faith and courage shine in remarkable ways in the darkest moments of their lives. Their joy is contagious even in severe pain. They would say that – one day at a time – it is God's strength through His Word that sustains them. That's just what the Bible says it will do. It promises things like joy inexpressible and peace that passes understanding. I don't know if I have those things, but I've seen them in many others in the depths of their suffering. I do not think any merely human book could have such a sustaining power for so many suffering people around the globe and across thousands of years of human history.

## **10. The Glory of God.**

God's glory is His unique excellence, the ways in which He is infinitely greater than anyone else. My personal conviction is that there is no God like the one presented in these pages. No other God matches the beauty of His character as portrayed here. All of the other gods of humanity are either reflections of ourselves, kind of like human beings on super steroids; or else they are something like the biblical God but without the full scope of His character. The god of the imaginations of most Americans has none of the justice and righteousness of the God of the Bible; the god of Islam cannot match his love; the god of Mormonism was once a sinning man; the gods of the ancient pagans were often capricious and nasty.

The Bible says that there is no one like Yahweh, the great self-existence one who is infinitely greater than anyone else. His character meets the deepest problems and desires of man's heart like no other god can do. And so I believe His glory as portrayed in the Bible is truly distinct, and marks the Bible as something more than just another human attempt to imagine God. It convinces me that the Bible is actually God's self-revelation, it is an uncovering of the one true God.