Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

The Centrality of Scripture:
A Brief Analysis of John Peckham's *Canonical Theology*

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Introduction

In our previous paper—"What is Theology? Learning from Charles Hodge and Karl Barth"—we argued for a view of theology that was largely based on Hodge's definition but also took into account some valid conclusions from Barth:

> Theology must, with Hodge, confidently look to Scripture as God's special, objective revelation of Himself and His work to man and be firmly grounded in the facts of Scripture obtained through careful inductive study of it, and it must also, with Barth, be centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ and proceed humbly from faith in Jesus Christ, with prayer, and within the context of the Christian community.[1]

Anyone who reads that definition can quickly see that one's view of *Scripture*, its authority, and its role holds a very prominent position in shaping one's theology. In many evangelical circles, it might be taken for granted what we or Hodge mean by "Scripture," its authority, and its role, but that is not necessarily a safe assumption. What constitutes these in the life of the Church and task of theology has been and is debated. Therefore, we need to define them in more detail.

This is what John C. Peckham attempts to do in his book *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon,* Sola Scriptura, *and the Theological Method*. In particular, he wants to answer the questions of what the respective roles of the canon of Scripture and the Christian community are and who has final authority when it comes to theology. How we answer those questions will have a great impact on how we do theology and our conclusions. In this paper, we will summarize Peckham's view and offer a brief evaluation of it.

Peckham's Intrinsic Canon, *sola Scriptura*, and Theological Method

[1] A. T. Rollo, "What is Theology? Learning from Charles Hodge and Karl Barth" (Grand Rapids, MI: Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, 2021).

Peckham begins his work by noting that the heart of the debate over the role of Scripture, community, and authority is a "vital philosophical division between those who believe that the canon is a community-determined construction (the community canon model) and those who believe that the canon is divinely appointed… (the intrinsic canon model)."[2] Over and against the community canon model, which puts final authority in the community to determine the canon of Scripture and therefore theology, Peckham argues for the intrinsic canon model where "the books of Scripture are not canonical based on the determination of the community, but in virtue of the intrinsic nature of the books as divinely commissioned."[3] Whether or not they are seen *functionally* as canon, they are *intrinsically* authoritative for theology because of their divine origin.[4]

Peckham then spends several chapters defining and defending the intrinsic canon of Scripture. He argues convincingly and in considerable detail for the 66 books of Scripture as have been most commonly accepted by Protestants.[5] He also spends time arguing for their acceptance in their *final* form, as opposed to methodologies that would speculatively attempt to look "behind" the text and reconstruct some kind of authoritative, pre-canonical form.[6]

Within this discussion of the intrinsic canon, Peckham discusses the foundational Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, and he helpfully distinguishes between "reductionist *sola Scriptura*, canonical *sola Scriptura*, and communitarian *sola Scriptura*."[7] He defines the reductionist view as those who "would take Scripture alone to be the 'rule,' but with the view that Scripture requires no interpretation alongside an isolationist (and perhaps anti-intellectualist) standpoint that purports to interpret Scripture apart from the influence of any tradition."[8] He quickly demonstrates how this view cannot stand on

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[2] John Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 2, Kindle.

[3] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 5.

[4] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 48–53.

[5] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 16–72.

[6] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 192–212.

[7] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 11.

[8] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 12.

logical or biblical grounds and dismisses it. He defines the communitarian view as the "approach that proposes a community-determined, extracanonical rule as interpretive arbiter" for Scripture.[9] He points out that this view cannot logically stand since there are unanswerable questions like "Whose community has final authority?" Finally, he argues for what he calls the canonical view, which "contends that the canon *qua* canon is the rule and standard of Christian theology, while recognizing that the canon requires interpretation (cf. Luke 10: 26) and rejecting isolationism and the private interpretation of Scripture."[10] Much later in the book, he explains further what he means by canonical *sola Scriptura*:

> Canonical *sola Scriptura* should not be understood to mean that: (1) Scripture is the only source of knowledge; (2) Scripture excludes reason, requires no interpretation, or is subject to private interpretation; (3) interpretive communities and traditions past and present should be ignored or dismissed; or (4) all theological doctrine requires a direct biblical statement (or statements).[11]

In this way, he hopes to demonstrate that *sola Scriptura*, rightly understood, holds the canon of Scripture as the final authority but does not dismiss reason, scholarship, creeds, confessions, and other types of helpful interpretative tools. These are necessary but all subordinate to Scripture itself.

Peckham then discusses his theological methodology on this basis of the intrinsic canon and canonical *sola Scriptura*. He first argues for no "rule of faith" besides Scripture itself. All other rules of faith, according to Peckham, put Christians in the position of choosing a community or some other authority outside of and above Scripture to adjudicate how Scripture ought to be interpreted. Instead, he argues that the interpretation of Scripture should be controlled by a proper view of the analogy of Scripture and a proper understanding of hermeneutics and the role of tradition.

His discussion of the analogy of Scripture seems to us to be very similar to the Reformed view of this hermeneutical key as expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF): "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself."[12] Peckham expresses it this way:

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[9] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 12.

[10] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 12.

[11] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 142.

[12] Presbyterian Church in America, ed., *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Lawrenceville, Ga.: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), chap. 1.9.

> The thrust of the analogy of Scripture as understood by this approach is that particular passages should be understood in light of other passages, extending to the entire canon (cf. Isa 8: 20; Luke 24: 44). In this way, the analogy of Scripture is intended to safeguard against eisegesis and private, idiosyncratic interpretations of Scripture.[13]

In his methodology, Peckham is arguing for an approach that balances the "inner logic of the texts in relation to the whole canonical text."[14] He then goes on to make a helpful distinction between three levels of hermeneutics: "Microhermeneutical principles refer to those at the level of examination of individual texts and pericopes, macrohermeneutical principles refer to the overarching conceptual framework, and mesohermeneutical principles refer to individual doctrines in between."[15] In this canonical methodology, these three—the individual text, the canonical context, and systematic theology—are always interacting and correcting each other towards a more faithful theology:

> One's conceptual framework (macro) sets the ontological and epistemological parameters within which doctrines (meso) are conceptualized, both of which impinge upon one's reading of the text itself (micro). Conversely, one's reading of the text itself (micro) should impinge upon one's meso- and macrohermeneutical presuppositions.[16]

He calls this process the "hermeneutical spiral." Within it, there *is* a place in Peckham's model for tradition that is not seen as authoritative in interpretation of the canonical text. He writes:

> The only infallible, authoritative contemporary rule of faith, then, is the canon itself (all of it), by which any extracanonical tradition must be tested. At the same time, we should engage and learn from individual and community interpretations past and present. Many errors could be avoided by seriously engaging the history of Christian thought. Accordingly, the serious theologian should listen carefully (but not uncritically) to historical and contemporary Christian voices.[17]

In this way, he argues that tradition can be engaged without being determinative in one's interpretation of Scripture.

Evaluation of Peckham's Canonical Theology

[13] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 160.
[14] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 206.
[15] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 213.
[16] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 213.
[17] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 158–9.

There is much to praise and agree with in Peckham's view of the intrinsic canon and theological method. In fact, it seems to us that he does not say much that is different in *principle* from the standard Reformed view of the centrality of Scripture and its role in theology as defined in Reformed confessions and systematics. Therefore, we would agree with his definition of the intrinsic canon, canonical *sola Scriptura*, and the principles of his theological method. What we believe Peckham adds here is helpful clarity and distinctions that speak into contemporary debates over these issues, particularly when it comes to communitarian views of Scripture. However, at this point, we also think he makes certain assumptions, which would make his argument unconvincing to many who take a communitarian view.

In many places, he argues against a communitarian view of Scripture and theology, but in doing so, he does not adequately deal with three critical issues: truth, God's providence, and revelation. He asks many good questions of the community model like "Whose community is authoritative?"[18] and "Why accept any writings as authoritative at all?"[19] Yet, those questions only have validity *if* one shares his assumption of a classical view of truth, providence, and revelation. Someone who has a postmodern view of those issues might answer "My community is good for me, and your community is good for you" or "Each community needs an authoritative core that is *its* truth." It could be that he simply did not have the space to treat these issues, but even so, one would only find his arguments against community-driven models convincing if one shared his classical view of truth.

There are other areas worth praising about his view of Scripture and its role. He makes a good case and good challenge to those evangelical traditions that might *say* they view Scripture as authoritative and central to all theology but then *functionally* and interpretively take a communitarian view. For example, many Pentecostals that we know would argue that they view Scripture as the final authority, but then they would take the community's experience with charismatic gifts as normative for their interpretation of Paul, not the other way around, thus functionally taking a communitarian view.

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[18] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 53.
[19] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 70.

His work challenges such practice. Another area where we find Peckham helpful is his constant call for the theologian to be aware of his own presuppositions that he takes to his interpretation and to let the text challenge those and (if necessary) reform them.

Finally, one area where we think Peckham's *implementation* of his methodology (not necessarily its principle) fails is the weight he places on the microhermeneutical level over and against the macrohermeneutical and mesohermeneutical levels. This comes out clearly in his examples of his study of God's emotions in chapter nine and God's love in chapter ten. In both these case studies, we believe that he isolates a particular attribute of God from all others in his microhermeneutics, placing too much weight on his microhermeneutics, and then he makes certain conclusions with only minimal macro- and mesohermeneutical considerations. Furthermore, he then lets those conclusions drive his view of other attributes or doctrines. For example, in his study of God's love, his theological conclusions about God's love were only based on texts that "even slightly impinged"[20] on God's love but seem to ignore God's justice, His immutability, His sovereignty, His impassibility, and other texts and doctrines (the macro- and mesohermeneutical levels). Then, he asks, "If God loves in this way, what must God be like?"[21] and lets his isolated picture of God's love then drive his theology of God's sovereignty, immutability, and impassibility. He *does* say that "it could be misleading to attempt to derive a divine ontology from one divine characteristic, even one as major as divine love,"[22] but that is exactly what he does. He concludes that his study of God's love shows "God does not unilaterally effect his will and thus does not always get what he wants… whereas God is omnipotent, God does not (omnicausally) exercise all his power but allows creatures to affect history and himself, voluntarily limiting the exercise of his power."[23] He concludes that with very little consideration as to how what Scripture (macrohermeneutical) and systematic theology (mesohermeneutical) teach us about God's sovereignty, immutability, etc. may

[20] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 249.
[21] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 256.
[22] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 256.
[23] Peckham, *Canonical Theology*, 255–6.

qualify and interpret what the individual texts say about His love. A more balanced weight on that macro- and mesohermeneutical levels is necessary to be truly canonical and theological.

In conclusion, we find Peckham's understanding and defense of the intrinsic canon, canonical *sola Scriptura,* and the authority of Scripture to be faithful to Scripture's self-understanding and important to a proper view of its role in theology. We also find the principles in his theological method to be helpful and explanatory for the inductive method of theology. However, we believe that his implementation of it, at least in this work, places too much emphasis on the microhermeneutical level and not enough on macro- and mesohermeneutical levels. However, if one corrects this imbalance, Peckham's methodology would be very helpful in doing faith, biblical, God-honoring theology.

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