

The canonical theological method understands “canon” to mean both rule of faith and a unified collection or corpus, namely the biblical text. For Peckham, “Scripture is the canon because it consists of just those writings that God divinely commissioned to be canonical in the sense of a rule of faith. And if God commissioned them to be canonical in the sense of faith, what else should we build our theology on?”

This method posits that, if one takes the canon as the rule, all interpretations must continually be measured against the canon. Individuals may not come to the same interpretation and may in fact disagree, and, Peckham argues, “our interpretations will never be final. This is not a problem, rather it’s an opportunity to continually reform and correct our views so that they are in line with Scripture.”

While modern scholars took a stance of “hermeneutical positivism,” believing that everyone could come to the same conclusions if they read the text using a certain method, Peckham acknowledges that reading the biblical text is far more complicated. He also disagrees with communitarians, who argue for the community or its creeds to play the role of “normative interpretive arbiter,” reading the text through the lens of the Nicene or other ecumenical creeds in order to reach a consensus.

“The problem with the communitarian view is that if you say there is an extra-canonical normative interpretive arbiter of Scripture, then what truly has functional authority? Scripture can only say what the interpretive arbiter allows it to say,” he explains. Peckham rejects isolationism, the idea that every individual becomes their own interpreter, as well. “We have to recognize that there is a proper role for the community, it’s just not determinative or final.”

So how do we interpret the Scriptures? Peckham suggests looking at the interpretive process as a “hermeneutical spiral,” which he defines as “a continual spiral at two levels of what are called the hermeneutical circles.” In the first circle, there are two parties: the reader and the text. The reader brings presuppositions to the text, “but the text affects the reader and, if it is a canonical text, the reader should always submit to the text. It is a kind of disposition towards the text; an intentional posture that you take, not just a methodological step.”



John Peckham

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The second circle “is the circle between the individual parts of Scripture, or micro-exegesis, and the canon as a whole.” The reader’s presuppositions affect how they read the individual texts and their reading of the individual texts informs the understanding of the canon as a whole. “Both should be working together in a reciprocally helpful spiral in a way that the reading of the canon never imposes on the individual texts.”

Exegetically, there may be more than one acceptable reading. But, Peckham suggests, “the canonical reading can help choose between those options. If the canon is a congruent corpus, there may be only one or two options in a given pericope that fit with what the rest of the canon says.”

He applied the canonical theological method in his research on divine love, taking great care to allow his questions of the text to be shaped by the canonical investigation. “I found many things that contradicted what I would have thought, which was comforting, because it led me to believe that I wasn’t imposing my view on the text all the time,” he says with a laugh.

Peckham worked his way through the entire Bible, flagging any texts that related to the questions he was asking. Using this

inductive method, he systematically analyzed all the flagged verses, looking for patterns. His analysis factored in “how words were used in the text both thematically and conceptually. It opened up an abundance of word groups related to delight and pleasure, which are closely associated with love.”

He eventually came to five aspects of divine love, which are distributed across the various canonical sections (law, writings, prophets, etc.). “I also used secondary sources, going through commentaries on both sides of the historical critical argument, and developed a model that responded to the questions about divine love,” he says. He then used that model to flesh out the implications for the God-world relationship.

Peter Lang first published Peckham’s findings in his edited dissertation, “The Concept of Divine Love in the God World Relationship” (2014). “The Love of God,” which builds on his doctoral research, was published in 2015 and won Intersivarsity Press’s Reader’s Choice Award. In November of this year, Eerdmans will publish his book “Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, *Sola Scriptura* and Theological Method,” an expansion of the canonical theological methodology he developed for his dissertation.

Peckham is now coming full circle to the topic that originally sparked his interest: the problem of pain. Using the same inductive method, he has systematically surveyed the entire biblical text for relevant pericopes and is now analyzing the themes and patterns that have emerged from the text. Before him lies a laborious journey through the data he has gathered.

For Peckham, the theological landscape changes with his deepening understanding of biblical literature and each new project he tackles. “Classical Theology,” he says, “was trying to build a cathedral that they could defend. I use the analogy of a moving wilderness sanctuary. We aren’t trying to build all the structures of ontology and epistemology, not that we don’t speak to these areas, but we don’t answer all the questions these areas raise because we might not have enough data to answer all of them to our satisfaction. We want to move *with* our understanding of the canon.”

1 John C. Peckham, “The Love of God: A Canonical Model” (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intersivarsity Press Academic, 2015), 15