

Arguments From Spiritual Testimony

Objection #1: "All true Christians can 'hear' the Shepherd's voice speaking to them in the Scripture. John 10:4-5, 15 promises, 'When he puts forth all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. And a stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers...I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me.'¹ Therefore, all true believers are given scriptural assurance that they will 'hear the Shepherd's voice' when they read an inspired text."

Answer: This objection (and the others that follow) is based upon subjective evidence, which, by its very nature, is impossible to verify either by another "true believer" or an impartial bystander. How does a "true believers" know whether they really hear the Shepherd's voice speaking or they are following their own wishes and desires? How do they know with certainty that it was the Shepherd speaking in a given text and not a deceiving spirit? The mere fact that one has an internal conviction does not mean that that conviction must be from God and not some other source.

John 10 In Context

Assuming at the outset that John 10:4-5, 10 is an authentic and inspired canonical text, where in this passage is a mandate for future believers to construct a canon of Scripture based on "hearing the Shepherd's voice?" It doesn't exist. There is no indication that Our Lord even had the canon of Scripture in mind when He spoke these words. Rather, the objector is borrowing words from Scripture and accommodating them to be used for his own purposes.

Some may be tempted to state that the *true* believer will infallibly *know* when the Shepherd's voice is heard. But this begs the question. But if only a *true believer* can determine the canon, how can one first become a *true believer* except by following God's word in the canonical Scripture?² This argument is circular. *True* Christians are those that follow the Scriptures and the canonical Scriptures are those that *true Christians* follow (i.e. hear the Shepherd's voice)..

What are we do make of religious movements in history that heard the Shepherd's voice speak in different books. The Gnostics, the Marcionites and the Ebionites held contradictory positions on what was Scripture. Upon what basis, outside of an internal conviction, could the *true believer* demonstrate that these groups were wrong and that he or she was correct? The *true believer* cannot argue that their beliefs contradicted Scriptures since their teaching *did* conform to the Scriptures that they accepted. Indeed, these groups (if they still existed) could accuse the *true* believer of not being a *true believer* because the Protestant holds on to a different or contradictory canon.

The Shepherd's voice argument falls apart when one examines the specifics. For example, how can a *true believer* determine precisely where the Shepherd's voice resides? Could such a person honestly be able to attest to "hearing" Christ's voice clearly in each and every book of Scripture (including third letter of John, the Letter to Philemon, Numbers, Second Chronicles and Nahum)? If the Shepherd's voice argument were legitimate and one believes in plenary verbal inspiration (i.e. inspiration extends down to even the words chosen) it should logically follow that one should be able to hear the Shepherd's voice, not only in whole books, but even in sections of books. But is it really possible for one to hear the Shepherd's voice in Psalm 150, but not hear it in Psalm 151? Would one be capable of identifying legitimate manuscript traditions from uninspired but similar variant texts? Could a true believer tell which ending of the Gospel of Mark is a authentic one? One group of manuscripts ends Mark with the following passage:

¹ *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1977.

² Romans 10:13-15, 17 – The Protestant principle of Sola Scriptura teaches that all divine public revelation available to us today is found exclusively in the text of Scripture.

“When he had risen, early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told his companions who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. After this he appeared in another form to two of them walking along on their way to the country. They returned and told the others; but they did not believe them either. (But) later, as the eleven were at table, he appeared to them and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised. He said to them, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents (with their hands), and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.” [NAB]

Also, another group of manuscripts gives a shorter ending:

“And they reported all the instructions briefly to Peter's companions. Afterwards Jesus himself, through them, sent forth from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen.”

According to the “Shepherd’s voice” argument, the true sheep should be able to tell the difference.

Is it possible for a true believer to make a mistake? Remember, the Shepherd’s voice passage clearly states that His sheep will never follow the voice of a stranger. Yet, there are cases where apparently *true* believers (by even the strictest Protestant standards) seem to have heard the Shepherd’s voice in the Deuterocanon. A case in point is the Protestant divine John Bunyan, author of the famed Protestant allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*. In his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan writes:

“One day, after I had been so many weeks oppressed and cast down, as I was now quite giving up the Ghost of all my hopes of ever attaining life, that sentence fell with weight upon my spirit, ‘Look at the generations of old, and see: Did ever any trust in the Lord and was confounded?’ At which I was greatly lightened, and encouraged in my Soul...”³

Bunyan, drawing spiritual strength from this passage, searched his Protestant Bible for it, but to no avail. Eventually he discovered its location. It was from Sirach 2:10! Shocked that he had (if you will) “heard the Shepherd’s voice” in a disputed book, he dissembles only later to admit that this passage continued to bring him spiritual comfort.⁴ If Bunyan was a true believer and true believers will not follow the voice of strangers, how can one explain Bunyan’s favorable reaction to a passage in Sirach?

Finally, the Shepherd’s voice argument is simply impossible to be put into practice. Let’s use the illustration of a typical Christian crusade meeting to show this impracticality. The preacher stands at the front pulpit and preaches from the word of God. He invites all those who wish to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior to come forward and make a profession of Faith. Those who come forward are directed to a side of the area with a large table. The table contains booklets that were made from individual books of the Bible. The true believers return to their seats and begin to prayerfully read each booklet to see whether they hear the Shepherd’s voice. When they have completed their reading, all the new believers picked all those books and only those books found in the Protestant Bible! Does this phenomenon settle the question of the canon? No, not exactly. While they were able to affirm the complete Protestant canon, attesting that they heard Jesus’ voice in every book they read, there is still the matter of other books that may also be inspired. So, let’s reverse the tape. Now there is a longer table with all of the books from the

³ Metzger, 199

⁴ *ibide*, 200

Protestant canon and all of the disputed books as well. Would this be sufficient to make a closed canon? No. There are still many other books that were thought to be inspired Scripture for both the Old and the New Testaments.⁵ If the Shepherd's voice argument were to ever be implemented in practice, every true believer would have to read every book to be sure that he or she has the correct collection of books in their Bibles. Practically speaking, this is impossible to implement.

Some may wish to sidestep this problem by saying: "Of course, every new believer would not be required to read *every* book, but only the most probable candidates would be sufficient." If hearing the Shepherd's voice is the test to determine inspiration, how does one know which books are more likely than others without first employing the Shepherd's voice test? In other words, to limit the field of candidates prior to the Shepherd's voice test implies that there is another equally genuine method to determine the canon.

Objection #2: "John Calvin wrote: 'But although we may maintain the sacred Word of God against gainsayers, it does not follow that we shall forthwith implant the certainty which faith requires in their hearts. Profane men think that religion rests only on opinion, and, therefore that they may not believe foolishly, or on slight grounds desire and insists to have it proved by reason that Moses and the prophets were divinely inspired. But I answer, that the testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason. For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.'"⁶

"Also the Westminster Confession of Faith reads, 'The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.'

'We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverend esteem of the Holy Scripture. And 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 it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.'"⁷

Answer: There seems to be a bit of theological development between time Calvin penned his *Institutes* and its application in the *Westminster Confession*. The Protestant Reformer John Calvin seems to have understood the "inner witness" of the Holy Spirit as that by which a believer comes to the conviction that what is taught in sacred Scripture is true.⁸ In other words, he was speaking of the necessity of grace for one to come to supernatural Faith. When God reveals something as true, it is ultimately His grace that enables us to say our "Amen, Lord. I believe." This, of course, has nothing to do with the canon. By the time of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Calvinists began to apply the inner witness of the Holy Spirit to the determination of the canon. In doing so, it made the inner witness the *evidence*, not merely the *means*, by which one can know the canon.

⁵ E.g., the Acts of Peter, the Acts of Paul, the Preaching of Peter, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the First Letter of Clement, the Didache, the Gospel of Thomas, The Book of Jubilees, the Gospel of Philip, the Martyrdom of Isaiah, the Odes of Solomon, The Gospel of the Ebionites, the Secret Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Bartholomew, The Gospel of Nicodemus, the Infancy Gospel of James, the Acts of John, the Acts of Andrew, the Acts of Thomas, the Book of Enoch, The Sibylline Oracles, the Apocalypse of Ezra, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Apocalypse of Paul, the Apocalypse of Thomas, the Shepherd of Hermas, just to name a few.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), Book 1, Chapter 7, 72.

⁷ Westminster Confession, Section 1, Paragraph 4 and 5.

⁸ See "Why Protestant Bibles Are Smaller," Chapter 2, The French (Gallican) Confession, XXX. Others oppose this contention, such as the Protestant scholar Edward Ruess whose opinion is given later in this article.

The adoption of this theory by Protestants is a later development that the Reformers would have never seriously intended to use as a test for canonicity.⁹ As the Protestant scholar Edward Reuss writes:

“But I may also raise the opposite question, and ask by what motive they [the Reformers] were influenced in making the separation [of Scripture]? Was it really in virtue of the sovereign principle of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit? Would it be quite true to say that the first Protestant theologians, while unmoved by the enthusiastic eloquence of the author of *Wisdom*, so much extolled by the Alexandrians, felt the breath of God in the genealogies of *Chronicles*, or the topographical catalogues of the book of *Josua*? Did they really find so great a difference between the miracles of the Chaldean Daniel and those of the Greek Daniel that they felt bound to remove two chapters from the volume, which bears Daniel’s name? I have some difficulty in believing that they arrived at the *distinction* they drew by any test of that kind. On the other hand, it is very simple to suppose, or, rather, it is very easy to prove, from their own declarations, that their purpose was to re-establish the canon of the Old Testament in its primitive purity, such as it must have existed, according to common opinion, among the ancient Jews... frankly speaking it was the best thing for them to do.”¹⁰

According to Reuss, the Protestant Reformers never seriously tried to divine whether the Holy Spirit was witnessing to them that Esther was inspired and the Book of Baruch was not. Rather, they were attempting to *re-establish* the Old Testament canon in its theoretical primitive purity. I say theoretical because it is based upon the best information available in the sixteenth century. Later on, Protestants attempted to anchor the theoretical canon of the Reformers to divine moorings since, as they so often asserted, anything that is not disclosed by the Holy Spirit could be in error.

This argument ultimately runs into the same failures as Objection #1. It is based entirely on subjective and unverifiable evidence. It provides no test to determine whether this conviction of the inner witness indeed comes from the Holy Spirit, or self-deception, or even demonic deception. It fails to provide a demonstrable reason why Christians throughout history have come to different convictions based on their individual internal testimony of the Holy Spirit? How does one know that they were wrong and I am right? Practical problems are also present. Is the inner witness given to each individual book or to a collection of books? If one does not receive this divine conviction on the first reading, how do we know that he will not receive it on the second, third or one hundredth? Moreover, would this new “evidence” or “data” about the inspiration of certain books (whether after reading them or not) be tantamount to the Holy Spirit giving new public revelation?¹¹ Yet, Protestant and Catholics believe that all public revelation ceased with the death of the last Apostle.

The *Inner Witness Argument* also ought to be rejected because it threatens to undermine the Christian mission to evangelize. Christians are commanded to “always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you...”¹² It would be a pity if the only evidence that a Christian could offer in regard to canon would something nearly identical to that of the Mormon Church. Both of the *Shepherds Voice* and the *Inner Witness* arguments, if true, would do just that. Each year, Mormons, go door to door giving out copies of the *Book of Mormon* to whomever they meet. They ask people to read the book, pray and ask the Holy Spirit to give an inner witness – a “burning in the bosom” – to testify that the *Book of Mormon* is inspired by God. Each year, thousands of people become Mormons claiming that they received some sort of internal testimony that the *Book of Mormon* is true and that Joseph

⁹ Again, assuming that their words are interpreted as the inner witness being the *evidence* for belief rather than the *means* of belief.

¹⁰ Edward Reuss, *History of the Canon of the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Church*, (Edinburgh: James Gemmill, George IV. Bridge, 1890), 312 (emphasis his)

¹¹ After all, it is revelation, since it discloses something known to God that previously was not known to the believer. It is new, since there is no inspired table of contents in our bibles, nor is it ultimately dependent upon the origin deposit of faith left by Our Lord and his Apostles. It is public revelation, in that every Christian is obligated to accept as true the canon of Scripture.

¹² 1 Peter 3:15

Smith was a prophet. If the inner witness test is true, upon what basis could we argue against such a position? By holding to the weak and untenable inner witness position, the Christian's belief in the Bible becomes no better than a Mormon's belief in the *Book of Mormon*! For this reason and the others listed above, we ought to reject these arguments because they do not rely on objective verifiable evidence for the canon.

Objection #3 – “Some misunderstand the role of the illumination of the Holy Spirit in recognizing the inspiration of Scripture. It is not a one-time event where one reads a text and is immediately struck with the irrefutable notion that these are from God. Rather, it spans throughout a Christian's life bearing fruit in his heart. The Christian will observe an increase in charity and godliness both for himself and the community who also reads these books. It is only after a long and ever-deepening penetration and illumination of the Holy Spirit upon the believer that this inward witness gains hold and convicts us that the shorter canon of Scripture must be true and inspired.”

Answer: Before addressing the difficulties with this objection, we ought to affirm that the Holy Spirit is indeed alive and active within the individual Christian as well as in his Christian community. Also, the prayerful study and mediation on the sacred Scripture does produce wonderful spiritual fruit and growth in Christian holiness. I believe it is also undeniable that inspired texts do find a special affinity with the Christian community as a whole. The inspired Scriptures help us in our Christian walk; they move us become more deeply devoted to God and they give us voice in our worship. This being said, *the Spiritual Fruits Argument* does not provide an adequate ground for determining the canon.

The believer may have been given a Bible at an early age and later developed a conviction that those books bound together in the Bible are inspired. But how does one determine *which* books in that bound edition of the Bible produced the spiritual fruits that led to this conviction? The only way this could be determined would be to move book by book through the Bible evaluating whether spiritual fruits result. Once the books of the smaller canon are completed, the believer would then have to apply the same method to the disputed books and the apocryphal books as well.

Further difficulties remain unanswered. For example, how long does one need to read a given book before one can be certain that it will produce the required good fruit? How can a Christian discern that it was the reading of a book that produced these positive fruits and not other factors like prayer or Christian fellowship or the influence of a good sermon? How could one make such a fine distinction especially if this process of discernment takes place over a span of years? These difficulties multiply when one factors in the spiritual growth of an entire church community.

In conclusion, all three objections suffer from the same fatal maladies. They are subjective, unverifiable and ultimately undermine the Christian mission to evangelize the world since there is no viable explanation for the presence of contradictory experiences. Moreover, Scripture never promised believers that they would be able to discern whether a given writing is inspired by any of these methods. These arguments were created *post facto* to justify a canon that had already been adopted. Therefore, these arguments based upon spiritual testimony ought to be rejected.

© 2004 by Gary Michuta. All Rights Reserved. This is copyrighted material. No copying, distribution or reproduction (electronic or otherwise) is permitted without express permission from the copyright owner.