

*Text-Criticism and the Pulpit:  
Should We Preach About the Woman Caught in Adultery?*

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Bible Faculty Summit  
International Bible College and Seminary  
Chandler, AZ  
August 2019

## Introduction

A faithful pulpit ministry is characterized by two virtues: 1) the whole counsel of God is proclaimed;<sup>1</sup> 2) the preacher speaks authoritatively only to the degree that he can confidently say “thus saith the Lord.” It is for these reasons that the topic of this paper is of importance. The broad topic concerns how sensitive, text-critical issues should be handled in the pulpit. While there are many ways to address this topic, we will look at the issue through the lens of one highly debated passage.

In regard to the NT, two passages immediately come to mind when thinking about difficult text-critical passages in the pulpit: The *Pericope Adulterae*, more popularly known as “The Woman Caught in Adultery” (John 7:53–8:11), and the ending of Mark’s Gospel (16:9–20). The ending of Mark would make for a good case study, for it has been used to justify peculiar worship habits (i.e., handling snakes), and the lack of the ending leaves the reader unsatisfied (which actually might be the point!). But the passage under consideration here is “The Woman Caught in Adultery,” for it is a well-known and well-beloved narrative.

Thus we will look at the broad topic through the narrow question, “Should a pastor preach on ‘The Woman Caught in Adultery’?” This question is not merely academic. A now retired professor, who is presently aiding in local church ministry, mentioned in conversation that this topic may be fun to speak of in an academic context, but it is of grave concern to those who must enter the pulpit.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20:27 uses this language, though in a sense different than the sense popularly understood. Paul had only two and a half years with the Ephesians, and it is quite likely he did not exposit all of the Old Testament verse by verse. Nevertheless, Paul did communicate the fulness of the Scripture, and in order to do that he had to know what that Scripture indicated.

Why such grave concern? In addition to the desire to be a faithful steward of the pulpit ministry, pastors should also be concerned about the potential of leading their people to doubt. If handled poorly, the pastor may lead his people to doubt Scripture. On the other hand, he may lead people to doubt him as a pastor. Spurgeon noted this double problem as he spoke of the intersection of the pulpit and text-criticism: “It is unwise to be making every old lady distrust the only Bible she can get at, or what is more likely, mistrust you for falling out with her cherished treasure.”<sup>2</sup> Carefully navigating in the pulpit without falling into one of these two ditches is difficult and requires much wisdom.

This article is the fruit of research into both the academic works on the topic as well as the pastoral treatments of the passage. In regard to the former, numerous commentaries were surveyed in an attempt to discern patterns of how interpreters handled the passage. In regard to the latter, sermon series on the Gospel of John were examined concerning how pastors handled the text as it arose within a preaching series. In light of this research, a survey of positions will be provided along with a theological and logical analysis of those positions. The conclusion will offer suggestions on how the passage should be handled in the pulpit.

### **Can We Ignore the Issue?**

Before addressing how theologians and pastors have handled the topic, we should first recognize that some ignore the topic altogether, acting as though there is no text-critical problem.

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<sup>2</sup> He said this in relation to the Authorized Version, which he noted was “faulty in many places” yet still “a grand work.” Spurgeon was not against text-criticism, but he warned that a preacher must “correct where correction must be for truth’s sake, but never for the vainglorious display of [one’s] critical ability.” Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Commenting & Commentaries* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 31. See also, Elijah Hixson, “New Testament Textual Criticism in the Ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57 (2014): 555–70.

Consequently, they preach the text as though it is like any other passage in the Bible. While many pastoral examples of this abound (often in churches dedicated to the Authorized Version), there are some surprising examples in published literature as well. For example, *Exalting Jesus in John*, a volume in the Christ-Centered Exposition series, presents a sermon on the passage without any discussion of the difficulty.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Walter Lüthi's published sermons through John never addresses the issue, though he does present a sermon on the passage.<sup>4</sup>

Ignoring the issue, however, is damaging both to the pastor and the congregants. In regard to the pastor, it is necessary that he has confidence that what he preaches is actually God's Word. Accordingly, to ignore the issue is to abandon one's pastoral duty. It may be that the pastor is untrained in the discipline of text-criticism, yet surely he is able to read the work of those who are so trained. Thus, to the depth of his capability, he should determine the truth of the matter and proceed accordingly. Of course, there is always the danger that such study will lead in a direction the pastor would rather not go. But Broadus is as correct today as he was over a century ago when he stated in regard to the spurious ending of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:13), "We may give up the pleasing and familiar words with regret, but surely it is more important to know what the Bible really contains and really means, than to cling to something not really in the Bible, merely because it gratifies our taste, or even because it has for us some precious associations."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Matt Carter and Josh Wredberg, *Exalting Jesus in John*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville: B&H, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Walter Lüthi, *St. John's Gospel: An Exposition* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> John Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 139.

Ignoring the issue is also damaging to the congregation. Nearly every modern version of the Bible brackets this section off with a statement that reads something like, “The earliest manuscripts do not include 7:53–8:11.” Even if the pastor decides to ignore the issue, the congregant is hard pressed to ignore the marks in her Bible. She at least needs to know that her pastor knows about the issue. Michael Milton suggests that ignoring an obvious issue like this is comparable to ignoring a bird that flew in during the sermon: “If a sparrow flies into the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, at around the second point of the sermon, the preacher who continues his message without addressing the obvious flutter of little wings above the congregation, will not enjoy a congregation who hears his third point.”<sup>6</sup> In the same way, when a pastor avoids discussing an issue that the printed text highlights, they are at a risk of losing their audience. Perhaps they simply lose their attention, but just as likely they will lose the congregant’s confidence.

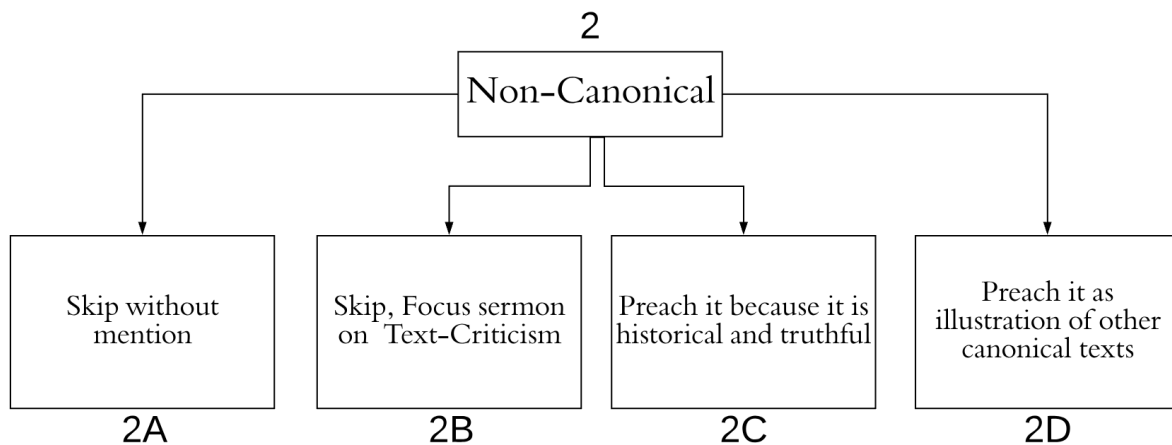
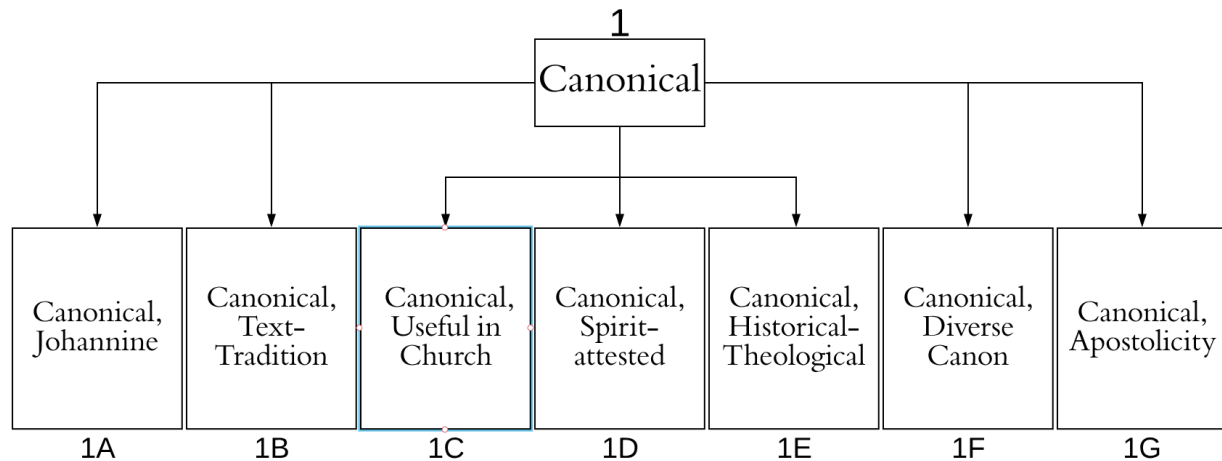
### **Charting the Options**

A simplistic view of the matter is as follows: If the text is canonical, then preach it. If it is not canonical, then do not preach it. But things are not so simple. First, there is significant debate concerning the meaning of canonicity. Second, we will find that there are many who believe the text is not canonical, and yet they still believe it should be preached. Finally, even those who agree it is non-canonical and should not be preached disagree concerning what should be done in a preaching cycle when the text comes up.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael A. Milton, “Preaching from the Footnotes: The Challenge of Textual Criticism in Expository Preaching,” n.d., accessed October 17, 2018, [https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/Preaching\\_from\\_the\\_Footnotes.PDF](https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/Preaching_from_the_Footnotes.PDF).

The following charts show the differing positions on how to handle this passage. They differ in that the first group believes the text is canonical, while the second does not. Each position is labeled with a number and letter (e.g., 1a, 2c) for ease of reference.



### **The Text is Canonical**

The following positions, all labeled with the number 1, believe that the text is canonical. The basis for such a belief is quite diverse. We will examine each in turn, sometimes focusing on how they define the canon, and sometimes assessing whether their evidential claims are accurate.

## 1A: It is Canonical Because the Text is original to John's Gospel

Throughout the history of scholarship there has been a minor undercurrent of scholars who argue that the narrative is genuine to John's Gospel. The most detailed defense is given by Maurice Robinson, a Majority Text advocate who has collated all of the manuscripts of John that include the pericope.<sup>7</sup> But since the case against the authenticity of the passage is so strong, few others have followed Robinson.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Metzger has noted that "The evidence for the non-Johannine origin of the pericope of the adulteress is overwhelming."<sup>9</sup> While we cannot develop the case at length here, it will be worthwhile to overview some of the data.

In regard to manuscript evidence, quite early and diverse manuscripts do not contain the reading (e.g.,  $\mathfrak{P}66$ ,  $\kappa$  B L N T W X Y  $\Delta$   $\Theta$   $\Psi$  0141 0211 etc.), and many early versions (Syriac and some Coptic) do not contain it. No pre-fifth century manuscript contains the reading. Even in manuscripts that contain the text, it is often accompanied by a mark identifying the debatable nature of the passage. The literature of the early church fathers provides little additional confidence, for with the exception of Didymus the Blind, no Greek father mentions the passage for the first millennium of the church's existence.

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Robinson, "Preliminary Observations Regarding the Pericopae Adulterae Based upon Fresh Collations of Nearly All Continuous-Text Manuscripts and All Lectionary Manuscripts Containing the Passage," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 13 (2000): 35-59. See also, Maurice Robinson, "The Pericope Adulterae: A Johannine Tapestry with Double Interlock," in *The Pericope of the Adulteress in Contemporary Research*, ed. David Alan Black and Jacob N. Cerone, Library of New Testament Studies 551 (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 115-146.

<sup>8</sup> Few commentaries argue for its inclusion. See, however, John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 449n1; Carl L. Laney, *John*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (4th Rev. Ed.)*, 2nd ed. (London: United Bible Societies, 1994), 187.

If the story is original, one would expect to find a reason for its exclusion from the text. Augustine thought it was excluded because some men might have been afraid that their wives would see it as license to sin, but scholars have found this quite unlikely.<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Bailey, on a similar note, imagines a man asking for a copy of John without the narrative so that he can give the copy to his daughter. His reasoning would be, “I don’t want my daughters committing adultery and telling me, ‘Jesus forgave this woman and therefore you should forgive me!’”<sup>11</sup> But again, such a position is highly speculative, and there is no other example of a text that was modified due to moral prudence.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, there is good reason to believe the narrative would have been added. The story portrays the forgiveness of Jesus in a powerful way, and it may have served early on to distinguish Christianity from Judaism.

As for the internal evidence, the passage “seriously interrupts the flow of thought in John’s narrative.”<sup>13</sup> Such disruption may partially explain why the passage appears in different places in different manuscripts (it occurs after 7:52 [D E (F) G H K M U Γ II 28 700 892]; after 7:36 [225]; after 7:44 [several Georgian mss]; after 21:25 [1 565 1076 1570 1582 arm<sup>mss</sup>]; and after Lk 21:38 [f]).<sup>14</sup> Further, the style and vocabulary appear to be distinct from the rest of John’s Gospel.

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<sup>10</sup> Augustine, “Adulterous Marriages,” in *Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, trans. Charles T. Wilcox, vol. 27, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 2.7, 107–08.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 230.

<sup>12</sup> Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 189.

<sup>13</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 1:736.

<sup>14</sup> Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 188–89.



When added together, the external and internal evidence strongly indicate the inauthenticity of the passage. Accordingly, few have found 1A to be an attractive position.

#### 1B: It is Canonical Because it is in a Text Tradition

This position suggests that some person or group in church history established the canon of the church, and since the pericope was included, it is now canonical. There are diverse groups who hold to positions under this broad umbrella.

The most prominent group holding to this perspective is the Roman Catholic Church. The Council of Trent settled the issue, for it stated “If anyone does not accept as sacred and canonical the aforesaid books in their entirety and *with all their parts*, as they have been accustomed to be read in the Catholic Church and *as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate Edition*, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema.”<sup>15</sup> While many Roman Catholic scholars argue against the authenticity of the passage on the grounds established above, they nevertheless accept the text as canonical Scripture due to the decision of the Council of Trent.

Three Roman Catholic examples may be given. First, the New American Bible editors clearly believe the text is an intrusion; nevertheless they indicate that “the Catholic Church accepts this passage as canonical scripture.”<sup>16</sup> Snakenburg also makes this same point, though

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<sup>15</sup> Italics added for emphasis. After two months of debate, there were 24 yes votes, 15 no votes, and 16 abstention. See, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/trent4.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Here is the full statement, showing their reasoning and then simple assertion of submission to authority: “The story of the woman caught in adultery is a later insertion here, missing from all early Greek manuscripts. A Western text-type insertion, attested mainly in Old Latin translations, it is found in different places in different manuscripts: here, or after Jn 7:36 or at the end of this gospel, or after Lk 21:38, or at the end of that gospel. There are many non-Johannine features in the language, and there are also many doubtful readings within the passage. The style and motifs are similar to those of Luke, and it fits better with the general situation at the end of Lk 21: but it was probably inserted here because of the allusion to Jer 17:13 (cf. note

more explicitly: “Since it is included in the *Vulgate*, and the Council of Trent did not make any further comment about it, it forms part of the canon, though this does not involve any decision about its literary origin.”<sup>17</sup> Finally, the Catholic Commentary on Scripture argues against the texts authenticity, yet states “the Church receives this text as inspired Scripture.”<sup>18</sup>

Outside the RCC, other groups also hold to a canon that includes the pericope. While the King James Version Only (KJVO) and *Textus Receptus* (TR) advocates do not believe in a council’s determination of the canon, they effectively embrace Erasmus’ work in a similar manner.<sup>19</sup> There is a wide variance within this movement, yet what is important for our purposes is that they all believe the text is canonical because it is in a particular text tradition.<sup>20</sup> Coming alongside these are Majority Text Proponents (MT; also known as Byzantine Priority advocates), like Maurice Robinson mentioned above.<sup>21</sup> While he makes an extended defense of the originality of the passage, it is hard not to conclude that his textual position significantly influences his view of the data.

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on Jn 8:6) and the statement, “I do not judge anyone,” in Jn 8:15. The Catholic Church accepts this passage as canonical scripture.” *The New American Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1816.

<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 2 (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 162.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Martin and William M. IV Wright, *The Gospel of John*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 151.

<sup>19</sup> The reasons for this are diverse, but generally these proponents indicate that God providentially led so that the text would be precisely what it is.

<sup>20</sup> For a defense of the passage from this perspective, see Peter S. Ruckman, *The “Errors” in the King James Bible* (Pensacola, FL: Bible Baptist Bookstore, 1999), 335–36.

<sup>21</sup> While there are significant differences between TRMaurice Robinson, “New Testament Textual Criticism: The Case for Byzantine Priority,” *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* 6 (2001).

These groups are aligned because they have chosen to base the canonicity of the text on the textual tradition they have accepted. Of course, there are some differences. In the Roman Catholic Church there is much agreement that the text is an intrusion on John's original Gospel. The KJV/TR/MT proponents generally argue that the text is original to John's Gospel. The ultimate foundation for their case, however, is not the text-critical evidence, but is their authoritative text-tradition. For those who see no authority in these sources, 1B is not an option.

#### 1C: It is Canonical Because the Spirit Works Through it

Like the text-tradition examples above, this position finds an authority outside the textual evidence for the canonicity of the text. In this case, ecclesiastical use determines the canon. Edward Klink is an explicit proponent of this position. While he believes the text is inauthentic, he nevertheless believes it is canonical: "The thirteen-hundred-year use and application of this text in the church becomes a kind of ecclesial argument, trusting in some limited capacity in the Spirit-guided decisions of the church and, behind the scenes, the providence of God."<sup>22</sup> Milton agrees, though he takes the argument in a slightly different direction:

No matter the controversies, the text is there. It may be disputed, but for some reason or another, the Church collectively through the centuries decided it should be there. It is more destructive to the work of the Church to gloss over the treasured contents of this repository than to decide to get rid of what has held the attention of the Church since the early centuries after the ascension of Jesus. ... I am not arguing for the majority text. I am arguing for the *majority time*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Edward W. Klink, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 389.

<sup>23</sup> Milton's quote indicates the closeness between this position and the last. Indeed, many people argue for the Majority Text on the basis of its historicity. Milton, "Preaching from the Footnotes: The Challenge of Textual Criticism in Expository Preaching," 3.

On this view, canonicity is a function of usefulness of a text among God's people. Such usefulness, these proponents stress, is providentially guided by the Holy Spirit. Burge clarifies the connection between the question of ecclesiastical use and canonicity as he speaks of the *pericope adulterae*: "The story edifies the Church and has often become a vehicle through which the Holy Spirit works. *Are these the grounds of the Protestant canon?* If so, the passage should remain firmly anchored in the NT."<sup>24</sup>

The position of Milton, Klink, and Burge is attractive in that it recognizes the role of the Spirit in the canonical process. Nevertheless, one wonders why text-criticism is necessary if this is the standard of canonicity?<sup>25</sup> Further, what is the role of apostolocity and inspiration in canonicity? These are questions we will return to. For now, it is enough to say that 1C offers a truncated view of canonicity, one which lacks the necessary depth for the concept.

#### 1D It is Canonical Because the Spirit Attests to its Canonicity

Kruger, following Calvin and others, has argued that the role of the Spirit is crucial in the historical process by which the church recognized of the canon. Accordingly, it is possible that someone would argue that the Spirit testifies to the inclusion of this narrative. To be clear Kruger does not argue this way, as will be shown below. Nevertheless, this is a logical position, and we should consider it.

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<sup>24</sup> Burge refrains from explicitly taking this view; nevertheless, his article suggests this is his view of the matter. Gary M Burge, "A Specific Problem in the New Testament Text and Canon: The Woman Caught in Adultery," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (1984): 148.

<sup>25</sup> More disturbingly, an abuse of this perspective could be used to eliminate sections of Scripture from canonicity, for some may be judged not to be used by the Spirit.

While some might suggest this position is the same as 1C, there is a major difference. When Kruger speaks of the Spirit's role in attesting to canonicity, he is not talking about the usefulness of the text in the church. Instead, he refers to the process whereby "the Holy Spirit works to overcome the noetic effects of sin and produces belief that these books are from God."<sup>26</sup> This work of the Spirit is often not direct, but is usually mediated through external evidences, including the positive case for the apostolicity of a text, its acceptance by the church, and a recognition of the divine qualities of a text.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, while the usefulness of the text throughout church history may be one of the evidences for canonicity, it is not decisive. Further, it is only a part of a larger process whereby the Spirit indicates to God's people what is canonical.

It is critical to note that Kruger does not think spirit-attestation can settle text-critical matters, for "The canon is the result of the church's corporate response; the individual textual variations are not. Thus, there is no reason to think that the final shape of the text is necessarily connected to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit or that the majority reading is necessarily the original one."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the testimony of the Spirit is applicable at the book level, but not the individual text level. In Kruger's words, since "[divine] qualities are bound up with the broader meaning, teaching, and doctrine communicated by a book, they are not as applicable to

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<sup>26</sup> Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 94.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 101n37.

individual textual variations (which, on the whole, tend to be quite small and change very little of the overall meaning).”<sup>29</sup>

The weakness of Kruger’s view can be seen in his parenthetical statement. What he says certainly applies to small textual matters, but what about the *Pericope Adulterae* or the ending of Mark’s Gospel? He does not explicitly address these. Likely he would note that though these disputed texts are of significant size, they pale in comparison to the size of the book they appear in. Accordingly, the text is not seriously altered. John’s Gospel, for instance, has the same message with or without the *pericope adulterae*. Thus, the Spirit witnesses to the canonicity of the Gospel of John, but such witness does not indicate anything about the inclusion of the debated passage.

### **1E: It is Canonical Because it is both Historical and Orthodox**

In a journal article articulating an interconfessional approach to the problem of the *pericope adulterae*, Armin Baum states that “If the [*Pericope Adulterae*] is considered to be orthodox and historical, nothing speaks against crediting it with canonical authority.”<sup>30</sup> Two standards are highlighted as necessary for canonicity: orthodoxy and historicity. As for the former, few argue that the text includes heterodoxy. Indeed, that is what makes the text so difficult. If the text had included false doctrine, then it would surely have been rejected many years ago (or would never have been included in the first place).

That the narrative is historical is less clear, though often assumed. The case for the historicity of the episode will be treated thoroughly below, when we consider position 2C. For

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Armin D. Baum, “Does the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) Have Canonical Authority? An Interconfessional Approach,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24 (2014): 175.

now, it is enough to recognize that some believe its claims for historicity along with its orthodox nature combine to form a solid case for the text's canonicity. F. F. Bruce appears to affirm the same perspective on the text, suggesting that such a "genuine remembrance of Jesus' ministry" as that recorded in the *Pericope Adulterae* "is eminently worthy of being treated as canonical."<sup>31</sup> And this is true even if, as Bruce believes, the text is not original to the Gospel of John.

Granted its historicity—a point we will challenge below—Baum asks, "What can be more authoritative than the authentic words and deeds of Jesus? Did not the first Christians develop the whole concept of canonicity on the basis of Jesus' (and his apostles') authority? Did not they regard every authentic word and deed of Jesus as normative for their Christian faith?"<sup>32</sup>

Baum's comments get to the heart of this position. If this is a true historical remembrance, and if much of the Gospels are retellings of true historical remembrances of Jesus' life, then why shouldn't this be parallel with the rest of Scripture? In answer, we must admit that we do not know it is true. In fact, even Baum concludes his article saying "the historicity of the event it relates has not been disproved. It is by all means plausible that the incident that the *Pericope Adulterae* narrates is just as authentic as the words and deeds of Jesus that are in the original Gospel of John."<sup>33</sup> Notice that Baum's case rests on the "plausible" and that which "has not been disproved." These are unstable foundations which cannot bear the weight Baum places on them.

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<sup>31</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 289.

<sup>32</sup> Baum, "Does the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7:53–8:11) Have Canonical Authority? An Interconfessional Approach," 175.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

Even if Baum could prove that the narrative is historical, there is still the matter concerning how the narrative is communicated. The doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration (a doctrine to which Baum may not subscribe) indicates that it is not only the historical narratives that are inspired, but it is the wording of those narratives coming from a Spirit-led author.<sup>34</sup> Further, Baum is correct to highlight that “One of the main objections against the historical-theological approach and against a historical and a theological testing of the PA’s canonicity is that it presupposes an open canon and therefore deprives the church of the normative basis for its theological judgments.”<sup>35</sup>

In sum, this perspective is correct to investigate the historicity and orthodoxy of the narrative. If either definitively proves faulty, the case for canonicity also falls. Nevertheless, historicity and orthodoxy are not sufficient criteria for canonicity.<sup>36</sup> As with 1C, this position offers a truncated and insufficient view of canonicity.

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<sup>34</sup> Second Timothy 3:16 indicates that the Scriptures are “breathed out by God,” investing the very words with authority. In regard to narratives, the truth is not just the historical situation they convey, but it also includes the way that narrative is told. For example, the statement “Jesus was angry so he flipped over tables and threw people out of the temple” is historically accurate and orthodox. Nevertheless, the way it is told is less than ideal. It could mislead, and it does not capture what Scripture captures as it speaks of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. This simple illustration is meant to highlight that the words one uses matter just as the historical truths being communicated.

<sup>35</sup> Baum, “Does the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) Have Canonical Authority? An Interconfessional Approach,” 177. He does not consider this a problem, noting that certain segments of the church have held a different canon in history. Further, he notes that churches who hold to the *Pericope Adulterae* and those that do not would not differ in any significant way.



1F: It is Canonical because Authoritative Forms of the Text are Canonical

Another perspective on the canonicity of the *Pericope Adulterae* derives from a particular view of text-criticism. In light of the variances between manuscripts, scholars cannot know with certainty the exact form of the original text. In light of this fact, some have suggested that canonicity applies to any reading that has held authority within the church. For instance, Eldon Epp, after noting that the original text is unattainable, says “the canonicity of readings has virtually the same degree of multiformity as do the meaningful competing variants.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, there is more than one canon. The reason for this is stated plainly by Epp as he questions the meaning of “canonical”: “what can ‘canonical’ mean when each of our 5,300 Greek new Testament manuscripts and perhaps 9,000 versional manuscripts, as well as every one now lost, was considered authoritative—and therefore canonical—in worship and instruction in one or more of the thousands upon thousands of individuals churches *when no two manuscripts are alike?*”<sup>38</sup> For Epp, then, the *Pericope Adulterae* may or may not be canonical, depending on whether the group in question considers the text authoritative.

Bruce Metzger also recognizes the challenge of text-criticism in relation to canonicity, but he seeks to solve the problem in a different way. For Metzger, it is best to view canonicity as pertaining “to the document *qua* document, and not to one particular form or version of that document.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, Mark’s Gospel was canonical and the question of the end of the text was not a consideration in regard to its canonicity. It is for this reason, Metzger suggests, that the

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<sup>37</sup> Eldon Jay Epp, “Interrelation of New Testament Textual Criticism and Canon,” in *Perspectives on New Testament Textual Criticism* (Boston: Brill, 2005), 638.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 636.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 269.

delineation of canonicity did not result in an attempt to specify which readings were “canonical.”<sup>40</sup> Metzger provides a modern analogy: “Churches today accept a wide variety of contemporary versions as canonical New Testament, though the versions differ not only as to rendering but also with respect to the presence or absence of certain verses.”<sup>41</sup>

Metzger does limit the variants that would be allowed in a canonical text by whether they appear very early. In his words, “The category of ‘canonical’ appears to have been broad enough to include all variant readings (as well as variant renderings in early versions) that emerged during the course of the transmission of the New Testament documents while apostolic tradition was still a living entity, with an intermingling of written and oral forms of that tradition.”<sup>42</sup> By the “apostolic tradition” as a “living entity,” Metzger does not mean traditions that derive from the life of the apostles. He provides an example with the long ending of Mark, which was known to the church fathers Justin Martyr and Tatian. Apparently, these second century men lived during the living testimony of the apostles, for in light of their knowledge of the text, Metzger concludes, “There seems to be good reason . . . to conclude that, though external and internal evidence is conclusive against the authenticity of the last twelve verses as coming from the same pen as the rest of the Gospel, the passage ought to be accepted as part of the canonical text of Mark.”<sup>43</sup>

While Metzger and Epp have differing views on the relation between canonicity and text-criticism, they are both seeking to answer the same question: How can we attribute canonicity to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 270.

a text that is as unstable as the NT documents have proved to be? Epp, by seeing canonicity primarily as a social construction, simplifies the process by noting that all texts deemed authoritative for a group are canonical. Metzger, who wants to maintain some connection between canonicity and apostolic tradition, argues that any form of the text that can be traced back to the second century or earlier may be considered canonical. What is lost in all of this, however, is the role of the Spirit and inspiration. Do we mean by canonical merely that a text has authority, or that it was penned before a certain period? These are the fruits of canonicity, not their root. Accordingly, no matter how much authority is placed in a text by a religious group, that text is not canonical if not from the Spirit. Further, no matter how early a variant enters the stream of manuscripts, it is not canonical if not from the Spirit. In sum, 1F fails just as 1C and 1E by offering an insufficient definition of canonicity.

#### 1G: It is Canonical Because it is Apostolic

For those who believe a text must have apostolic authority (whether direct or indirect) in order to be canonical, the inauthenticity of the *Pericope Adulterae* in John's Gospel appears to rule it out of the canon. There is a hybrid view, however, that suggests the passage is apostolic even if not penned by John for the Gospel. This perspective was explored at length by Kaczorowski, who suggests that the text is an "inspired text inserted into an inspired text."<sup>44</sup> He argues that the passage gives evidence of antiquity, apostolicity, historicity, and orthodoxy while also showing itself useful in the church.

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<sup>44</sup> Scott J. Kaczorowski, "The Pericope of the Woman Caught in Adultery: An Inspired Text Inserted into an Inspired Text?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61 (2018): 321–37.

Others have argued from a similar perspective. In a sermon on the passage, R. C. Sproul opened by defending his preaching of the passage on the following grounds:

The overwhelming consensus of text critics is that it was not part of the original Gospel of John, at least not at this portion of John. At the same time, the overwhelming consensus is this account is authentic, *apostolic* and it should be contained in any edition of the NT. I believe it is nothing less than the Word of God. Whether it belongs here in John's Gospel or at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Luke, or somewhere else in John's Gospel, I leave to the ages. But I am treating it as nothing less than the very Word of God.<sup>45</sup>

Along the same lines, Russel Smith, in a printed sermon, said, "Most conservative scholars agree that this passage depicts a genuine incident in Jesus' life and that it *bears the marks of authorship by one of the apostles*. Therefore, I believe it is safe to assume that this passage is genuinely inspired Scripture, though it may not have been authored by John."<sup>46</sup>

This position is attractive in that it gives full weight to the evidence that the story does not belong in John's Gospel. Nevertheless, the nearly insurmountable problem is that the text is not attested until long after the apostolic period. The most Kaczorowski is able to say is that "We feel it is unlikely that the story only reached written form as late as the third century."<sup>47</sup> Further, that early church fathers did not make use of this powerful story also speaks against its apostolic origin.

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<sup>45</sup> Emphasis added. R.C. Sproul, *The Woman Caught in Adultery*, n.d., accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/sermons/woman-caught-adultery/>.

<sup>46</sup> Emphasis added. Russell Smith, "False Judges: A Sermon on John 8:1–11" *IIIM Magazine* 3, no. 43 (October 2001).

<sup>47</sup> Kaczorowski, "The Pericope of the Woman Caught in Adultery: An Inspired Text Inserted into an Inspired Text?," 334.

## Conclusion to the Canonical Views

Despite their diversity, each of the prior positions agreed that the *Pericope Adulterae* was canonical. But each fell short for one of three reasons. First, some failed in regard to evidence. For instance, the claim that the text is original to the Gospel goes against the evidence (1A), while the claims that the text is apostolic (1G) or is factually historical (1E) lack sufficient evidence. Second, some of the canonical arguments failed to convince because they are based on spurious claims of authority—whether from a church council or from a revered text-tradition (1B).

Third, the other three canonical arguments failed to convince because they are based on truncated definitions of canonicity. Brevards Childs once said that “much of the present confusion over the problem of canon turns on the failure to reach an agreement regarding the terminology.”<sup>48</sup> This is still true today, as is evident by the differing definitions of canonicity offered above. Following Kruger, a robust definition of canonicity takes into account the character of the text (its divine qualities), the corporate reception of the church, and its apostolic origins.<sup>49</sup> These are confirmed to God’s people through the attestation of the Spirit. Many of the definitions used above, however, isolate one or two of these factors. For instance, that the text is canonical because it is useful in the church (1C) maximizes one of the characteristics of the text and makes it sufficient for canonicity. Additionally, the position that the text is Spirit-attested (1E) separates the Spirit’s attestation from the evidences the Spirit uses to attest to canonical Scripture. Finally, that the canon is diverse because the text-critical problems are early and

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<sup>48</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Fortress Press, 1979), 179.

<sup>49</sup> Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 118.

abundant (1F) fails either because the proponent overemphasizes the role of corporate reception in canonicity (e.g., Eldon Epp) or the author extends apostolicity beyond the lifetime of the apostles (e.g., Metzger).

On the basis of a robust definition of canon and with the manuscript evidence we have at present, the case for the canonicity of the text falters. If it is not canonical, how should the text be handled in the pulpit? To this question we now turn.

### **The Text is Not Canonical**

Settling the issue of the canonicity of the text does not solve the problem of what a pastor should do when the *Pericope Adulterae* comes up in a preaching series. We will address four positions a pastor may take.

#### **2A: It is Non-Canonical, so Skip the Text without Explicit Consideration**

This is the opposite problem of the person who preaches the text without mentioning the text-critical problems. In the former case, people wonder what the brackets in their Bible mean. In this case, people may wonder why their Pastor does not believe the Bible. Though he speaks in reference to Bible translations, Ben Witherington's comments are appropriate here: "If you leave it out without any comments, there are bound to be thousands of Bible readers asking, 'Is this Thomas Jefferson's Bible?'"<sup>50</sup>

If modern versions of the Bible relegated the entire pericope to the footnotes, a pastor may be able to make minor comment and move along, continuing John's narrative. As it stands,

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<sup>50</sup> As quoted in an interview: Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Is 'go and Sin No More' Biblical?," *Christianity Today* 52, no. 6 (June 2008): 46.

however, few versions are willing to do this.<sup>51</sup> The RSV initially did so, but placed the passage back in the main text in the second edition due to outside pressures.<sup>52</sup> Comfort asks a legitimate question in this regard: “Isn’t it the task of translators to remove those obstacles that keep the reader from comprehending the meaning of the original text? If so, this ‘fixture’ should be relegated to the margin, so that the reader can see the continuity of John’s narrative.”<sup>53</sup> Dan Wallace indicates that modern versions continue to print the text because of a continued “tradition of timidity.”<sup>54</sup> But regardless of the reason, modern versions have kept the passage in the body of the text, and therefore it cannot be safely ignored.

Just as the brackets force those who think the text is genuine to talk about the text-critical issues at hand, so the inclusion of the text in the main body of modern versions also requires those who believe the text is non-canonical to address it. To ignore the passage altogether is to neglect the needs of the congregants. While passing over the text has the benefit of not interrupting John’s narrative, the pastor risks leaving the distracted listener behind. Therefore, the next position addresses the issue head on.

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<sup>51</sup> Even some of the scholarly focused Greek New Testament texts keep the text in brackets (NA and UBS). On the other hand, some have properly relegated the text to the footnotes (THGNT and SBLGNT).

<sup>52</sup> Philip Wesley Comfort, “The Pericope of the Adulteress,” *The Bible Translator* 40 (n.d.): 145. See also, Philip Wesley Comfort, *Early Manuscripts & Modern Translations of the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990), 116.

<sup>53</sup> Comfort, “The Pericope of the Adulteress,” 145. See also, Comfort, *Early Manuscripts & Modern Translations of the New Testament*, 116. It should be mentioned that the New World Translation places it in a footnote.

<sup>54</sup> As quoted in an interview: Zylstra, “Is ‘go and Sin No More’ Biblical?”

## 2B: It is Non-Canonical, so Use the Opportunity to Speak about Text-Criticism

While there are many small textual issues throughout the NT, there are only a few that are of significant size. When these arrive in a preaching schedule, they provide the pastor the opportunity to address text-criticism from the pulpit. While some might refrain from doing this, believing the topic too controversial, esoteric, or difficult for the congregants, there are good reasons to consider it.

First, faithful Bible readers often meet text-criticism in their Bible reading. Of course, it is not direct, but whenever they read an alternative version and discover it says something different, or when they see a footnote offering a different reading, they are facing text-criticism. Do they know how to handle these footnotes and differences? Second, there is only one New York Times Best Seller that discusses text-criticism, and it is written by someone who opposes an Evangelical definition of Scripture.<sup>55</sup> While your people might not read Ehrman's work, they very well may have conversations with relatives or friends at work who have done so. Textual matters can be unsettling for the unaware, and it is less than ideal that they first meet the challenge of it from a skeptic.

Of course, the teaching on text-criticism need not take up the majority of the sermon, though it could. The pastor could either combine the teaching of text-criticism with one of the options mentioned below (2C or 2D), or he could explain why he is passing over the material and move on to the next section of John's Gospel. In either case, it does seem wise to address the topic.

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<sup>55</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).



2C: It is non-canonical, but the narrative is true and the passage historical, so preach it

Though a pastor may decide that the text is not canonical, he may believe the text communicates a true story concerning Jesus. This is a very common view. For example, Carson says, “There is little reason for doubting that the event here described occurred, even if in its written form it did not in the beginning belong to the canonical books.”<sup>56</sup> Leon Morris adds, “But if we cannot feel that this is part of John’s Gospel, we can feel that the story is true to the character of Jesus. Throughout the history of the church it has been held that, whoever wrote it, this little story is authentic. It rings true.”<sup>57</sup> Michaels is more bold, claiming that “It is undoubtedly a true incident in Jesus’ life.”<sup>58</sup> Tenney agrees with Michaels: “It doubtless constitutes a genuine account of an episode of His career.”<sup>59</sup>

John’s Gospel indicates that there are many more things Jesus said than we have recorded in the four Gospels (21:25). We even have *agrapha* (teaching of Jesus not recorded in the Gospels) expressed elsewhere in the NT (“It is more blessed to give than to receive” [Acts 20:35]). Accordingly, it is possible that this narrative truly occurred. The literary and historical evidence, however, is not convincing.

As for the literary evidence, the criterion that this episode “sounds like Jesus” fails to convince. The danger of casting Jesus in our own image must always be guarded against, and a

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<sup>56</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 333.

<sup>57</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 779.

<sup>58</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 146.

<sup>59</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Eerdmans, 1997), 138.

criterion of “sounds like Jesus” can too easily devolve into that error. For instance, many would claim that Jesus being angry (Mk 3:5) or Jesus telling a Gentile woman that it is not right to toss the children’s bread to dogs does not “sound like Jesus” (Mat 15:26). While statements like “God accepts everyone just as they are” are touted by many to “sound like Jesus.” Indeed, Bridges is correct to warn that “One should use the ‘sounds like Jesus’ criterion sparingly, if only because it ‘sounds like’ the Jesus Seminar.”<sup>60</sup>

Other literary evidence is more supportive. There are many similarities between the *Pericope Adulterae* and other Gospel narratives. For instance, the narrative presents Jesus answering a question designed to trick him in a way that turns the tables on the questioners (e.g., Mat 21:25). Further, Jesus is merciful to the sinful and offers forgiveness to those who recognize their sin. Finally, there is an apparent subversion of the law, which is actually a deeper confirmation of it.<sup>61</sup> Added to these is the claims that the *Pericope Adulterae* shows similarity to Johannine and Lukan style.<sup>62</sup>

On the historical side, there is a statement made by Papias, a second century church father, about “a woman who was accused before the Lord of many sins, which the Gospel

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<sup>60</sup> Carl B. Bridges, “The Canonical Status of the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11),” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 11 (2008): 216n17.

<sup>61</sup> See the excellent treatment of this in Kaczorowski, “The Pericope of the Woman Caught in Adultery: An Inspired Text Inserted into an Inspired Text?,” 332.

<sup>62</sup> Kaczorowski’s article argues for a similarity with Luke, while Baum argues for similarity to John. Whitacre argues for it being a mix between synoptic and Johannine presentations, and that though it is clearly foreign to the document, it is a “patch sewn onto John’s Gospel” which has the “same pattern as the whole, even if the colors are somewhat different.” Ibid., 325–27; Baum, “Does the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11) Have Canonical Authority? An Interconfessional Approach,” 335; Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 210.

according to the Hebrews contains.”<sup>63</sup> It is uncertain that this episode is the same one we are presently discussing, however. The woman in that story has many sins, while in the *Pericope Adulterae* it appears to be one sin. Further, the chain of witnesses is not convincing. First, Papias only knew the disciples of the apostles. Second, we know what Papias says only through the quotations of a later writer, Eusebius. Thus, Kaczorowski appears far too optimistic when he says, “The fact that this story (or one very much like it) came down to Papias through his conversations with those who had known the apostles points not just to the antiquity of the account but also suggests its apostolicity.”<sup>64</sup> In reality, we are not even sure it is the same narrative, and even if so, the distance of the witnesses rules out all confidence.

The only other historical evidence occurs in the third century and later.<sup>65</sup> Some have argued that though the textual evidence begins in the third century, the narrative must have originated prior to that point. This is because the ascetic, moralistic nature of the church at the time would not have created such a scandalous narrative. In the words of Metzger, “No ascetically minded monk would have invented a narrative that closes with what seems to be only a mild rebuke on Jesus’ part.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History, Books 1–5*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, vol. 19, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 206.

<sup>64</sup> Kaczorowski, “The Pericope of the Woman Caught in Adultery: An Inspired Text Inserted into an Inspired Text?,” 332.

<sup>65</sup> Didymus the Blind, who wrote in the fourth century, certainly knew the story as is evidenced by his account in *Ecclesiastes Commentary*, 223.6b–13a, which was translated in Bart D. Ehrman, “Jesus and the Adulteress,” *New Testament Studies* 34 (January 1988): 25. The third century *Didascalia Apostolorum* in Syrian also contains the narrative.

<sup>66</sup> B. M. Metzger and B. D. Ehrman, *The Text of New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 319.

As can be seen from the survey of evidence above, there is little reason to believe this narrative is historically factual. It may be, but the burden of proof has not been met. Accordingly, the preacher is on unstable ground if he preaches the text because it is historically accurate.

2D: It is Non-Canonical, but it is a “Benign Expansion,” so it can be Used Illustratively<sup>67</sup>

The final position we will examine argues that the text is non-canonical, but since its contents are taught in other places in Scripture, the material can be used illustratively. John Piper handled this passage this way. After noting that many commentators believe the *Pericope Adulterae* to be historical, he went on to say, “Perhaps. I would like to think so. Who doesn’t love this story? But that does not give it the authority of Scripture. So what I will do is take its most remarkable point and show that it is true on the basis of other parts of Scripture, and so let this story not be the basis of our authority, but an echo and a pointer to our authority, namely, the Scriptures, that teach what it says.” Later he clarified, “I am not going to say what I am about to preach to you is because of this text [the *Pericope Adulterae*]. I don’t think I have the warrant to do that. I preach the word of God, and I don’t think this is part of it. Even if [the narrative truly] happened.”<sup>68</sup>

David Doran offered a similar perspective, noting that even though many argue the narrative to be historically factual, “I can’t bring myself in good conscience to [preach it]. I don’t have any reason to think it didn’t happen. But I also don’t have a reason to believe God intended

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<sup>67</sup> Bridges defines the *Pericope Adulterae* as a “benign expansion” by which he means that its truth-claims are consistent with the message of the NT. Bridges, “The Canonical Status of the Pericope Adulterae (John 7:53–8:11),” 220–21. Cf. Steven J. Cole, “Caught in the Act (John 7:53-8:11),” 2014, accessed July 18, 2019, <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-45-caught-act-john-753-811>.

<sup>68</sup> John Piper, “Neither Do I Condemn You,” *Desiring God*, March 6, 2011, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/neither-do-i-condemn-you--3>.

for us to have this as an inspired record, so I can't see preaching a message from it." He then offers an analogy: "It would be like if I opened a church history book and said, this event happened, so let me preach a sermon to you about it. I would actually be taking a stance on the authority that is outside the Bible."<sup>69</sup> Despite not having grounds for preaching it, Doran argues that it can still be useful, for "It rings with an illustrious power of what we know to be true. There is nothing contrary to the Scripture taught in this story." On this basis Doran indicates a proper course of action: "Let's not go through the story to biblical truths;" instead, he suggests going through biblical truths to the story.<sup>70</sup>

These pastors do not deny the historical truthfulness of the narrative, but since they cannot prove it, they are unwilling to preach it. Nevertheless, they also see that the truths presented in the narrative are consistent with other passages of Scripture, and thus they are willing to preach the truths of the narrative but only on the authority of other biblical texts.

### **Conclusion**

The question of whether one should preach about the "Woman Caught in Adultery" is a theological question at heart. Its answer depends on one's view of canonicity, inspiration, preservation, and the role of the ecclesiastical office.

Though likely not controversial, the conclusion of this paper is that the *Pericope Adulterae* is not canonical. This assessment is based on the textual and historical evidence, as well as on a robust, Evangelical definition of canon. Having concluded it is not canonical, four options were presented concerning how to handle the passage as it comes up in an expositional

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<sup>69</sup> David Doran, *The Woman Caught in Adultery*, Unpublished Sermon (Allen Park, MI, 2013).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

series on John's Gospel. Since nearly all modern versions include the passage in the main text, it is not safe to avoid the passage. Further, since there is insufficient evidence to conclude that the non-canonical narrative is historically accurate, one should not simply preach the passage. Two options remain, and they are not exclusive. First, one may teach on why the passage will be skipped and thus teach the basics of text-criticism. Second, one may preach the truths of the narrative sourced in other, clearly canonical texts. It is possible, and perhaps best, to do both.<sup>71</sup> One may start the message talking about the text-critical issues and then transition to preaching the text on the basis of other passages. In this way, the preacher is able to confidently say "thus saith the Lord."

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<sup>71</sup> Significantly, both Piper and Doran began their messages by overviewing text-criticism, helping their people understand the issues. The second half of their sermon was an analysis of the text which focused on the shared truths with other Scripture. In this way, Piper and Doran combined views 2B and 2D.