

Text: various

We continue with our series on Orthodoxy, especially combating the idea that what we call orthodoxy is just the “belief system that won” among several competing “orthodoxies” in various churches in the early centuries.

The whole idea is preposterous, but since people propose such things, we need to combat them. I am thankful for the book I’m using as the source for these messages, as it does a good job at defending the gospel against these attacks.

Today, I want to read two paragraphs that begin the discussion of “the Emerging Canon in Early Christianity...”

In the previous chapter, we examined how the Bauer thesis has led many modern scholars to understand the canon as a concept that arose solely from within the life of the early church and then was retroactively applied to books not originally written for that purpose (and thus, in principle, could have been applied to any set of books within the early centuries of Christianity). What ended up as the “canon” was determined solely by the actions of human beings—as one Christian group battled for supremacy and dominance over competing Christian groups—and had nothing to do with any divine purpose or activity. Such a paradigm has reigned unchallenged within the world of modern biblical studies for generations and has affected the manner in which the historical evidence for an emerging canon is evaluated.

As a result, many in modern canonical studies have interpreted the historical evidence in a manner that places the origin of the New Testament canon well into the late second century (and even beyond). Harnack famously argued that the canon was the result of the church’s reaction to the heretic Marcion, thus placing the canon in the mid to late second century. This position was also defended by the very influential work of von Campenhausen as he continued to argue for the latter half of the second century as the critical time of canonical formation. Such a position is well exemplified by Helmut Koester who declared, “The New Testament canon of Holy Scripture ... was thus essentially created by Irenaeus” in the late second century. Elaine Pagels, in her recent book *Beyond Belief*, follows Koester’s argument and virtually lays the entire creation of the New Testament canon at the feet of Irenaeus.¹

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, Kindle Edition (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010), 125–26.

Maybe that's more than you need, but I want to point out that if we can show that the idea of the canon precedes the middle of the 2nd century (*i.e.*, AD 150), we can show that the claims of the critics are wrong.

If we can show that the NT itself contains the idea of an NT canon, we can demolish the claim completely.

Proposition: The NT assumes, and the Church Fathers affirm, that the idea of a NT Canon comes from the age of the apostles which the early church accepted.

I. The NT idea of a canon expressed

A. The implications of 2 Pt 3.16

2 Pt 3.16 as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.

1. Peter references Paul's letters
2. This passage written after *all* Paul's death most likely
3. Peter compares Paul's letters to "the rest of the Scriptures" — implying that Paul's letters *are* Scripture
4. Peter's manner is casual:

"as if he expected his readers would have already known about Paul's writings and would agree they are Scripture"²

5. Some attack 2 Peter as not written by Peter
 - a. Arguments are circular, not convincing
 - b. Even those who attack 2 Peter will date it between AD 100 and AD 125: showing a *very* early date for the idea of a set of "Scripture writings" like Paul's letters
 - c. Conservatives vigorously contend with these attacks and hold to Peter as author, around AD 68 at latest

² Köstenberger and Kruger, 128.

B. The early citations of Luke as Scripture: 1 Tim 5.18 quotes Lk 10.7 (and Dt 25.4)

1 Tim 5.18 For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages."

C. The equal status of the OT prophets and the NT apostles

1. Holy Prophets and "your apostles"

2 Pt 3.2 that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior *spoken* by your apostles.

2. The prophets, the Son, "those who heard" *i.e.*, the apostles

Heb 1.1-2 ¶ God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,² in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

Heb 2.2-3 For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty,³ how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,

D. Public reading of canonical books

Col 4.16 When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter *that is coming* from Laodicea.

1Th 5.27 ¶ I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren.

2 Cor 10.8 For even if I boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be put to shame,⁹ for I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters.

Rev 1.3 Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

“This practice of reading Scripture in worship can be traced back to the Jewish synagogue where portions from the Old Testament were routinely read aloud to the congregation (Luke 4:17–20; Acts 13:15; 15:21).”³

¹ Tim 4.13 Until I come, give attention to the *public* reading of *Scripture*, to exhortation and teaching.

II. The NT idea of a canon accepted

A. Public reading of the Scriptures

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.”⁴

1. “memoirs of the apostles” = “the writings of the prophets”
2. Apostles listed first
3. Writing mid-2nd c.

B. Exhortations of church fathers

1. Clement of Rome, writing to the Corinthians

“Take up the epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul. What did he write to you at the time when the Gospel first began to be preached? Truly, under the inspiration of the Spirit, he wrote to you concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos, because even then parties had been formed among you. But that inclination for one above another entailed less guilt upon you, inasmuch as your partialities were then shown towards apostles, already of high reputation, and towards a man whom they had approved.”⁵

³ Köstenberger and Kruger, 133.

⁴ Justin Martyr, First Apology, 67, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, electronic ed. (Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000).

⁵ ¹ Clement 47 in Schaff.

- a. Calls Paul “the blessed Apostle”
- b. Calls the Corinthians to submit to what they already knew, 1 Corinthians
- c. Clement in his writings also refers to Romans, Galatians, Philippians, Ephesians, and Hebrews as authoritative
- d. Clement calls 1 Cor “under the inspiration of the Spirit”

“The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ [has done so] from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God. Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand.”⁶

2. The Didache

“The Didache is an early Christian manual of church practice probably from around the turn of the century (c. AD 100).”⁷

- a. Enjoins the Lord’s prayer as found in Matthew

“Neither pray ye *as the hypocrites*, but as the Lord commanded in His Gospel, *thus pray ye: Our Father, which art in heaven*”⁸

- b. Obey as you find it in the Gospel:

“But your prayers and your almsgivings and all your deeds so do ye as ye find it in the Gospel of our Lord.”⁹

⁶ 1 Clement 42 in Schaff.

⁷ Köstenberger and Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 139.

⁸ Didache 8.2 in J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. J. R. Harmer (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891), 232.

⁹ Didache 15.4 in Lightfoot, 235.

c. Compare Didache 4.13 with Dt 4.2

“Thou shalt never forsake the commandments of the Lord; but shalt keep those things which thou hast received, neither adding to them nor taking away from them.”¹⁰

Dt 4.2 “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

3. Ignatius

“Ignatius was the bishop of Antioch at the turn of the century and wrote a number of epistles en route to his martyrdom in Rome in about AD 110.”¹¹

a. To the Ephesians, he speaks of a high view of “every letter” of Paul

“Ye are associates in the mysteries with Paul, who was sanctified, who obtained a good report, who is worthy of all felicitation; in whose foot-steps I would fain be found treading, when I shall attain unto God; who in every letter maketh mention of you in Christ Jesus.”¹²

b. To the Magnesians, speaks of the authority of the apostles (plural)

“Do your diligence therefore that ye be confirmed in the ordinances of the Lord and of the Apostles, that ye may prosper in all things whatsoever ye do in flesh and spirit, by faith and by love, in the Son and Father and in the Spirit”¹³

¹⁰ Didache 4.13 in Lightfoot, 231.

¹¹ Köstenberger and Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 140.

¹² Ephesians 12.2 in Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 140.

¹³ Magnesians 13.1 Lightfoot, 145–46.

4. No time for others

- a. Polycarp
- b. Epistle of Barnabas
- c. Papias

Conclusion:

“this chapter has demonstrated that the concept of canon not only existed before the middle of the second century, but that a number of New Testament books were already received and being used as authoritative documents in the life of the church.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Köstenberger and Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 149.