

Text: 2 Tim 3.16, 2 Pt 3.15-16

In our series, we've been countering the idea that Orthodox Christianity is just the "version" of Christianity that won out and defeated competing versions that had as much right to be heard as "orthodoxy."

"The central tenet of Bauer's reconstruction of Christianity is that the reason one set of books 'wins' and another does not has nothing to do with the characteristics of the books themselves or their historical connections to an apostle and certainly has nothing to do with any activity of God, but is the result of a political power grab by the victorious party."¹

Our method has been to work from the Bible outwards:

- The core message of the Bible consistently centers on the doctrine of Jesus Christ
- The authorized representatives of Jesus consistently preached that doctrine everywhere
- The Bible shapes its own orthodoxy, and the believing church receives its message

Last week: The Bible itself contains the "embryo" of the idea of an authorized list of NT scriptures.

The Bauer/Ehrman attack on orthodoxy makes some fatal assumptions when it comes to "which books win."¹

1. They assume that the NT books and the extra-Biblical books are "indistinguishable in regard to their historical merits."²
2. They assume God gave no means by which to identify His books.

In all this, there is an attempt to distract from really examining the merits of the books in question *and* a misrepresentation of the state of things in the early church with respect to the canon.

The impression our opponents give is that there was kind of a "free-for-all" among the churches about which books were in and which were out.

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, Kindle Edition (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010), 155.

² Köstenberger and Kruger, 154.

Consequently, this week I want to talk about the boundaries of the New Testament canon.

Does the Bible say anything about what books are in and out? Can we make reasonable and faithful claims about the process?

We will start with two familiar passages in this context:

2 Tim 3.16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

2 Pt 3.15-16 and regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you,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.

Proposition: The questions of the canon are minor questions about the edges of the canon, not major questions about competing canons.

I. The established core

A. The Old Testament accepted wholesale by the Christian church

1. Well established by the Jews from over 400 years before Christ
2. Used by the Church to preach Christ

Illustration: Philip and the Ethiopian, Ac 8.26-35, esp. 32-35

Ac 8.32-35 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH."³³ "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH."³⁴ The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?"³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

- a. The Ethiopian is reading Isaiah 53 in the OT
- b. Philip uses it to preach Jesus to him

- c. This is the NT pattern, see the sermons in Acts, esp. those to a Jewish audience
3. Our opening text, 2 Tim 3.16, assumes the OT Scriptures in its statements (at the bare minimum)

2 Tim 3.16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

4. The OT Scriptures become the standard to judge all subsequent writings

“For example, any Gnostic version of the faith that suggests the God of the Old Testament was not the true God but a ‘demiurge’—as in the case of the heretic Marcion—would have been deemed unorthodox on the basis of these Old Testament canonical books alone.”³

“Gnosticism was a non-starter from the outset because it rejected the very book the earliest Christians recognized as authoritative—the Old Testament.”⁴

B. The New Testament core (from last week’s message and 2 Pt passage):

2 Pt 3.15-16 and regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you,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. The four Gospels

“Although much is made of apocryphal gospels in early Christianity, the fact of the matter is that no apocryphal

³ Köstenberger and Kruger, 156.

⁴ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 115, quoted in Köstenberger and Kruger, 156.

gospel was ever a serious contender for a spot in the New Testament canon.”⁵

And note that these apocryphal gospels are late, not 1st century, as the NT books are.

Irenaeus, about AD 180:

“It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the “pillar and ground” of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men afresh.”⁶

Note: Irenaeus is offered as a *witness*, **not** an *argument*!

2. The epistles of Paul (all of them)

- a. Used constantly by all the Church Fathers as authorities
- b. Irenaeus explicitly affirms all of Paul’s epistles (except maybe Philemon)
- c. Ancient doc called *The Muratorion Fragment* published a list of authoritative books, incl all Paul’s epistles and others

“The implications of this historical scenario are clear. The vast majority of ‘disagreements’ about the boundaries of the New Testament canon focused narrowly on only a handful of books, while the core of the New Testament was intact from a very early time period.”⁷

“What is really remarkable . . . is that, though the fringes of the New Testament canon remained unsettled for centuries, a high degree of unanimity concerning the

⁵ Köstenberger and Kruger, 157.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, electronic ed. (Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000).

⁷ Köstenberger and Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 158.

greater part of the New Testament was attained within the first two centuries among the very diverse and scattered congregations not only throughout the Mediterranean world but also over an area extending from Britain to Mesopotamia.”⁸

II. The books on the fringes

A. Books not listed on every church list immediately

2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, Hebrews

1. They were listed on some authoritative lists
2. They were not listed on all

B. Some factors

1. Geography: books written in different places
2. Copies not immediately accessible in every church

C. “Closing” of the canon

1. Critics claim canon left open until the “mid-4th c.” (350s)
2. First, by no means was the canon a “free for all” before this period
3. Example: Muratorian Fragment (about AD 180)

“In the Muratorian Fragment of the second century, the very popular Shepherd of Hermas is mentioned as a book that can be read by the church but is rejected as canonical. The grounds for this rejection are due to the fact that it was written ‘very recently, in our own times.’ In other words, the author of the fragment reflects the conviction that early Christians were not willing to accept books written in the second century or later but had restricted themselves to books from the apostolic time period.”⁹

- a. In other words, canon closed at end of 1st c.
- b. Question was what to do with books already written, not books newly written (in 200s)

⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 254, quoted in Köstenberger and Kruger, 158.

⁹ Köstenberger and Kruger, 158.

Conclusion:

“We should not be surprised, therefore, by this obvious but often overlooked fact: *the very books eventually affirmed by early Christians are those which the majority of modern scholars would agree derive from the apostolic time period; and those books rejected by early Christians are the ones the majority of modern scholars agree are late and secondary.* It appears that the early Christians were quite perceptive after all as to which books represented authentic Christianity and which did not.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Köstenberger and Kruger, 174.