

CURRENT CHALLENGES TO THE CHRISTIAN CANON

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I. INTRODUCTION

This article, which also could be entitled “Should the New Testament canon be augmented to include alternate expressions of early Christianity, most notably Gnosticism?” deals with a timely subject that has captured the imagination of popular audiences due to the *DaVinci Code*, and has stirred up old controversies in the academy, thanks to scholars like Elaine Pagels, Karen King, John Dominic Crossan, Bart Ehrman, along with the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar. The purpose of this article is to inform the reader about the current debate over the relationship between the Christian canon (particularly the NT), and orthodoxy. Should the two be equated or not? Perhaps the best way to proceed would be to summarize the subject by highlighting three stages of the debate: (1) the traditional understanding of the Christian canon, namely, the NT is rightly equated with orthodoxy; (2) the liberal challenge to the traditional view, which is that the NT canon should be expanded to include alternative expressions of early Christianities; (3) the traditional counter-responses to the liberal challenge.¹

II. THE TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHRISTIAN CANON

According to this view the NT is rightly equated with orthodoxy. James D. G. Dunn, in his masterful book, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* provides a

¹ By using the title “Christian canon,” this author does not intend to restrict its contents to the NT since he believes it also includes the OT/HB.

helpful summary statement of the traditional view of Christian orthodoxy and, by implication, its relationship to the NT canon:

The classical view of orthodoxy is that there always has been a single, pure faith reaching right back to the apostles, that the Church has kept the teaching of Jesus and the apostles undefiled. In the fight against heresy from the latter decades of the second century onwards the typical picture presented by orthodoxy was that heresy was a corrupt offshoot from the true faith; in all cases the pure teaching of orthodoxy had been established first; only at a later stage did the wolves and false teachers appear to disturb the flock and distort the faith. Thus, for example, Eusebius quotes Hegesippus to the effect that ‘godless error’ only began to penetrate into the Church in the second century when all the apostles had passed on, before which time the Church ‘had remained a virgin, pure, and uncorrupted’ (*HE*, III.32.7-8). Similarly, Tertullian, one of the earliest and doughtiest champions of this view of orthodoxy and heresy: “Were Christians found before Christ? Or heresy before true doctrine? But in everything truth precedes its counterfeit. It would be absurd to regard heresy as the prior doctrine since it is prophesied that heresy should arise (*prae. Haer.*, 29).” And the same writer castigates and characterizes Marcion as ‘a deserter before he became a heretic.’ (*adv. Marc.* 1.1).²

We can say that there are three key words or assumptions driving the preceding perspective: authority, unity, and continuity.

Authority

The four canonical Gospels are reliable and therefore provide the correct interpretation of the historical Jesus. This is so because of their apostolic *imprimatur*: Matthew and John were two of the original twelve disciples who passed on eyewitness accounts of the earthly Jesus. Mark was Peter’s interpreter and Luke received his information from Mary, mother of Jesus, and others in the know about Christ. The upshot of this assumption is that these four Gospels equate the historical Jesus with the Christ of faith.

Unity

The rest of the NT concurs with the accounts of the Gospels, taking their testimonies one step further by making the one gospel of the four Gospels the basis of Christian orthodoxy.

² James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990) 2–3.

Continuity

Such orthodoxy continued to be championed in the second through the fifth centuries AD thanks to the efforts of Irenaeus, Athanasius, and even Emperor Constantine, and was objectively recorded by Eusebius. And this rule of faith, or orthodoxy, guided the Church in its formation of the NT, weeding out all other contenders for the faith.

III. THE LIBERAL CHALLENGE TO THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

According to this position, the NT canon should be expanded to include alternate expressions of early Christianities. But the rise of the historical critical method called the aforementioned assumptions into question, offering instead a different paradigm for grasping the relationship between the NT canon and orthodoxy. Three notable scholars advocating this new construct quickly come to mind: Hermann Reimarus (1694–1768), Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), and Walter Bauer (1877–1960).

Authority

H. Reimarus's, *On the Intention of Jesus and His Disciples* (published posthumously by G. E. Lessing) assaulted the reliability, and thus the authority, of the canonical Gospels. According to Reimarus, Jesus preached the coming of a political kingdom of God, one that would liberate ancient Jews from Roman enslavement. Such an inflammatory message brought about Jesus' demise at the hands of the Roman officials. But the disciples, intent on perpetuating the cause, invented the idea that Jesus was a suffering Messiah who had been raised from the dead. To prevent the refutation of their claims, the disciples stole Jesus' body from the tomb. No scholar today agrees with Reimarus's reconstruction of the historical Jesus. But, as Albert Schweitzer noted in his classic study, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*,³ more than anyone else Reimarus began the critical quest to establish what really happened in Jesus' life, based on the premise that the Gospel narratives are not reliable, but later, embellished stories written by believers with a vested interest in them. Bart D. Ehrman, in his book, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, pinpoints the significance of this train of thought that began with Reimarus and continued down to Rudolph Bultmann and to the Jesus Seminar today:

But once we begin to suspect the historical accuracy of our Gospel sources, and find evidence that corroborates our suspicions, where does that lead us? With regard to our questions about the nature of orthodoxy and heresy in early Christianity, it leads us *away* from the classical

³Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1910) chap. 2.

notion that orthodoxy is rooted in the apostles' teaching as accurately preserved in the New Testament Gospels and *to* the realization that the doctrines of orthodox Christianity must have developed at a time later than the historical Jesus and his apostles, later even than our earliest Christian writings. These views are generally held by scholars today, based on in-depth analyses of the Gospel traditions since the days of Reimarus.⁴

Unity

If Reimarus and others questioned the authority of the four Gospels, it would be F. C. Baur who jettisoned the supposed unified voice of the rest of the NT. According to him, not one gospel, but two, permeate the NT writings: on the one hand, Paul and his gospel of justification by faith alone and, on the other hand, Peter and James with their gospel of justification by faith plus the Jewish Law. Consequently, a theological civil war was unleashed in the early Church that runs rampant throughout the Christian canon, suppressed only by an idealistically sanguine portrait of Peter and Paul revealed in Acts. And even though later scholars unmasked Baur's construct for what it was—the application of the Hegelian dialectic to first century texts—the damage to the perceived unity of the message of the NT had been done.

Continuity

Thus far in this second point, we have seen the apparent dismantling of the apostolic authority of the four Gospels and the seeming disintegration of the unity of the one gospel message in the NT. And, according to many, the result was that no longer could we pit the “orthodoxy” of the NT against the “heresies” of later centuries. Rather, the two—orthodoxy and heresy—commingle within the pages of the Christian canon itself. In other words, earliest Christianity was pluralistic from the get go.

It would be left to Walter Bauer to argue that the same diversity to the point of contradiction characterized the second-century Church. In his, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, W. Bauer tried to demonstrate that second-century Christianity was a very mixed bag. There was no pure form of Christianity that existed in the beginning which can properly be called orthodoxy. In fact there was no uniform concept of orthodoxy at all—only different forms of Christianity competing for the loyalty of believers. In many places, particularly Egypt and eastern Syria, it is more likely that what later churchmen called heterodox Christianity was the initial form of Christianity, the dominant force in the early decades of Christianity's establishment in these areas. The concept of orthodoxy only

⁴Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 170.

began to emerge in the struggle between different viewpoints—the party that won claimed the title orthodoxy for itself. Our viewpoint today is therefore distorted because we hear the voice of only one of the parties, the winners—Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, among others, and only echoes and quotations from the Ebionites, Marcionites, Montanists, and their cohorts.⁵

So, now, in place of a continuous stream of orthodoxy flowing from the first-century NT writers to the second-century Church, when orthodoxy was challenged by heresy, Bauer introduces the idea of the “historical winners.” Ehrman unpacks this term:

To this extent, “orthodoxy,” in the sense of a unified group advocating an apostolic doctrine accepted by the majority of Christians everywhere, simply did not exist in the second and third centuries. Nor was “heresy” secondarily derived from an original teaching through an infusion of Jewish ideas or pagan philosophy. Beliefs that later came to be accepted as orthodox or heretical were competing interpretations of Christianity, and the groups that held them were scattered throughout the empire. Eventually one of these groups established itself as dominant, acquiring more converts than all the others, over-powering its opponents, and declaring itself the true faith. Once its victory was secured, it could call itself “orthodox” and marginalize the opposition parties as heretics. It then rewrote the history of the conflict, making its views and the people who held them appear to have been in the majority from apostolic times onwards.⁶

A ready-to-hand analogy for grasping this concept of “historical winners” in early Christianity can be found in the idea of Rabbinic Judaism which, through Talmudic sources, claims Pharisaism to have been the monolithic view of first-century Jews, an argument no longer plausible since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, not to mention the existence of the NT itself.

All of this is the background for the current challenge to the Christian canon, which comes most notably in the writings of Elaine Pagels, John Dominic Crossan, Bart Ehrman, and the Jesus Seminar, and is made palatable to the masses by the *DaVinci Code*. Their combined thesis is that non-canonical gospels like the *Gospels of Thomas, Peter, Mary Magdalene, Philip*, and the Nag Hammadi works in general have just as much right to be considered canonical as the four Gospels; more particularly that Gnosticism is just as valid a form of Christianity as orthodoxy, because the two co-existed in the first century.

⁵ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 3.

⁶ Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 173.

IV. THE TRADITIONAL COUNTER-ARGUMENTS TO THE LIBERAL CHALLENGE

Some well-known European scholars, or at least European-trained scholars, have, of course, recognized the liberal challenge to the NT canon for what it really is: an unbridled and uncritical embrace of Bultmannian assumptions—assumptions such as the unreliability of the oral transmission of the gospel tradition, the divorce of the historical Jesus from the Christ of faith, and the naïve belief in a pre-Christian Gnosticism. These European scholars carefully argue that Bultmann’s intellectual descendants have rushed to judgment in their condemnation of the exclusivity of the NT canon. Consider again our three terms: authority, unity, and continuity.

Authority

Martin Hengel, no ranting fundamentalist by any means, has devoted a lifetime of scholarship to demonstrating the basic reliability, and thus authority, of the four Gospels. His book, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, may turn out to be his *magnum opus* in that regard. After providing an insightful defense therein of the antiquity of the superscriptions of the Gospels (that is, the labels “The Gospel according to Mark, Luke, etc.” accompanied the four Gospels from their beginnings), Hengel makes the following points: (1) Mark is indeed Peter’s interpreter and therefore places us in direct contact with an eyewitness account of the historical Jesus; (2) Luke’s Gospel does the same, according to his prologue. This argument would be strengthened if Hengel is correct (as I suspect he is) that Luke’s two writings are connected with the Stephen circle, Hellenist Jews with whom Jesus had contact; (3) Matthew, though according to Hengel not one of the twelve disciples, is certainly dependent on Mark and most likely follows Luke, thus also basing Matthew squarely on eyewitness accounts of Jesus; (4) John, for Hengel, is the Elder, not the Apostle John, but was a Palestinian Jew who knew early traditions about Jesus and, as such, became the guarantor of Papias’s testimony (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4).⁷

You will recognize from these points that Hengel has engineered a rather brilliant campaign for the antiquity and the authority of the four Gospels without relying on the traditional attempt to equate the authors of those Gospels with the actual apostles. In doing so, I believe, Hengel (and others like him) has pulled the rug out from beneath the liberal stance, such that no longer can it be said that non-apostolic authorship of the four Gospels equals non-reliable accounts of the historical Jesus. And, speaking of Hengel, I am still looking for one reference to any of his fifty or more works in the writings of Crossan, the Jesus Seminar, Pagels, and Ehrman. I have to

⁷ Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

assume that either they have not read his research or, more likely, Hengel's dismantling of Bultmann's agenda is too threatening for them to acknowledge.

Unity

Another European scholar addresses the issue of the unity of the NT: the aforementioned James Dunn. The name of Dunn's title reflects the thesis of his book, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*. That is, though each NT author has his own theological agenda, which is sometimes at odds with other parts of the Christian canon (i.e. Paul and James in their presentations of the gospel, or John and Matthew in their perspectives on the Jewish Law), nevertheless there is a basic unity in the NT. And that unity is the equation of the historical Jesus with the exalted Christ. In terms of the NT canon, Dunn expresses that unity in the midst of diversity thusly:

It [the New Testament] canonizes the range of acceptable diversity but also the *limits* of acceptable diversity. It recognizes the Gospel of Matthew, but not the Gospel of the Ebionites, the Gospel of John but not the Gospel of Thomas, the Acts of the Apostles but not the Acts of Paul, the Apocalypse of John but not the Apocalypse of Peter. If the conviction that God meets us now through the one who was Jesus of Nazareth marks the beginning and heart of Christianity it also marks the limits and edge of Christianity.⁸

In other words, it is a falsehood when revisionist historians like Crossan, Pagels, and Ehrman claim that there was no core belief system, no critical mass of agreement, in first-century Christianity that could be called orthodoxy against which aberrant teachings could be measured.

Continuity

The last point about there being a unified message in the NT undermines Walter Bauer's argument that orthodoxy and heresy existed side by side from the beginning and only later at the councils did orthodoxy win out. Thus, Ben Witherington points out three flaws with this approach. First, there is no evidence that any system of heresy existed in the first century; not Marcionism; not Ebionism; and not Gnosticism. Second, with regard to

⁸ Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 387. Compare the recent work of I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004) 707–32, see also his bibliography for those supporting an essential unified theme in the NT. I believe Marshall has correctly established that the unified core of the NT encompasses more than Dunn allows; thus, Marshall rightly adds such components as Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God and the subsequent overlapping of the two ages, salvation by faith, and the community of faith's experience of the Spirit. Pate and Kennard confirm at the very least the first of these in their, *Deliverance Now and Not Yet: The New Testament and the Great Tribulation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

second-century Gnosticism in particular, there never was a time when any known Christian church recognized Gnostic texts as legitimate representatives of the Christian faith. This can be seen from the fact that no Gnostic texts were included in any of the early canon lists. Related to this, I might add that the Church fathers quote or allude to the twenty-seven books of the NT as inspired some 36,000 times; it must count for something that those Fathers do not do the same for Gnostic works! Third, in reality, Gnosticism could have never enamored the early Church for very long because Gnosticism rejected the OT, the HB, which was the foundation of the Christian faith, especially so concerning the goodness of creation.⁹ For a more detailed, point by point critique of Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, see H. E. W. Turner's, *The Pattern of Christian Truth*. In that insightful collection of essays, Turner argues persuasively against Bauer that there was indeed a core of belief that distinguished Christian orthodoxy from its inception and continued into the second century and beyond under the rubric of "the rule of faith."

V. CONCLUSION

Thus the reaffirmation of the authority, unity, and continuity of the Christian canon by the traditional view leads this interpreter to agree with Witherington:

The Gnostic documents were not deleted from the canon, rather they were never serious contenders for inclusion in it in the first place. . . . These documents were not recognized as having the same worth or authority as the canonical documents. . . . For some time certain scholars have distained the notion of an authoritative canon of Scripture. This idea is said to be offensive because it privileges certain documents over others. Sometimes this complaint takes the form of urging that we consider all the evidence in all the documents, a perfectly legitimate complaint. But sometimes it arises out of a distaste for the notion of exclusivity—the idea that the twenty-seven books of the New Testament tell the truth and have the truth, and one need not look elsewhere for salvation.¹⁰

Regardless of the claims of the *DaVinci Code* and similar ilk, one can look to the NT as the complete canon of Scripture, and have full confidence in its reliability.

⁹ Ben Witherington, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109, 126.