



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

To Know God

“What, then, does the activity of knowing God involve? ... first, listening to God’s word and receiving it as the Holy Spirit interprets it, in application to oneself; second, noting God’s nature and character, as His word and works reveal it; third, accepting His invitations, and doing what He commands; fourth, recognizing, and rejoicing in, the love that He has shown in thus approaching one and drawing one into this divine fellowship.” ~ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity Press, 1973), 32

History and Faith

“At least some aspects of the portrait of Jesus are essential to faith, for if historical research were ever able to prove conclusively that the historical Jesus was quite unlike the Jesus of the gospels, then faith would certainly be eroded. The gospel is concerned with history: not in that it stands if its claims could be verified by the historian, but in that it falls if the main lines of the early church’s portrait of Jesus of Nazareth were to be falsified by historical research.” ~ Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), 189; in Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 72

Canon Begins with Christ

David Anguish

Having noted some of the challenges to the traditional understanding of the 27-book canon, we turn to the developments that led to the New Testament [NT] as we have it.

First, by definition, “canon” is a transliteration of the Greek κανών (*kanōn*), from a Semitic word that referred to a “reed” or “straight rod” and then to “a measuring rule.” It appears four times in the NT, to refer to: [1] “imagery of a measuring rule: ‘means or basis for determining quality’, *rule, standard*” (Gal 6.16); and [2] “by ext[ension] of the idea of measuring: *a limit, of geographical jurisdiction*” (2 Cor 10.13, 15-16).¹ By *canon*, then, we refer to an authoritative standard by which we determine the church’s beliefs and practices.²

As understood by the church before Constantine, the original standard, or canon, was Christ. Irenaeus’s (c. 130 - c. 202) writings are instructive. He argued that “the truth [could be] obtain[ed] from the Church; since the apostles, like a rich man [depositing his money] (sic) in a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth: so that every man ... can draw from her the water of life.” Disputes could be settled by appealing “to the most ancient Churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse”; thus, all could “learn ... what is certain and clear ...”³

Irenaeus saw the writings as authoritative because they were written forms of the apostles’ teaching. As Carl Holladay writes, what is

critical for understanding Irenaeus’s use of Scripture is his conviction that the church’s tradition precedes the NT and becomes embodied within it. Insisting that the rule of faith (*regula fidei*) is traceable to Jesus himself, Irenaeus believes that it was transmitted by Jesus to the apostles. In turn, the apostles transmitted it faithfully to the next generation of leaders—the bishops of Rome. Irenaeus sees continuity between Jesus, his original circle of followers, most notably the Twelve, and the following generations of teachers and evangelists.⁴

The apostles made no claim to be the source of the teach-

A Different Teacher

“The most striking feature of the teaching of Jesus is that he was constantly talking about himself. ... This self-centeredness of the teaching of Jesus immediately sets him apart from the other great religious teachers of the world. They were self-effacing. He was self-advancing. They pointed men away from themselves, saying, ‘That is the truth, so far as I perceive it; follow that.’ Jesus said, ‘I am the truth; follow me.’ The founder of none of the ethnic religions ever dared to say such a thing. The personal pronoun forces itself repeatedly on our attention as we read his words.” ~ John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, hardcover ed. (Eerdmans, 1999), 23

The Virtue of Stopping

“When everything is moving at once, nothing appears to be moving, as on board ship. When everyone is moving towards depravity, no one seems to be moving, but if someone stops, he shows up the others who are rushing on by acting as a fixed point.” ~ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, ed. Alban Krailsheimer (Viking, 1966), 699/382, p. 247; in Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* (InterVarsity Press, 2000), 265

When Truth Is Lost

“What is new in our society is not the *practice* of lying. Humanity has always done that. What is new is not even the frequent practice of this vice. What is new is the loss of belief in the corresponding virtue. How can you tell the truth if you can’t know it?” ~ Peter Kreeft, *Moral Choices: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Moral Decisions* (Servant Books, 1990), 126

ing; it predated the writings and came from Jesus.

Accordingly, we read several texts where Jesus’s sayings are quoted or echoed⁵ (cf. Acts 20.35; 1 Cor 7.10, 12; 9.14; 11.23-26; 1 Tim 5.18). We also read how Jesus, who has all authority, kept his promise to send his Spirit to guide the apostles into all truth, enabling them to bind and loose what had already been decided (Matt 28.18; John 14.26; 16.12-15; Matt 16.19; 18.18).⁶ Thus, Paul would affirm that his teaching did not originate with him, but was given to him by revelation (Gal 1.11-12) that was mediated by the Spirit and revealed in words (1 Cor 2.12-13, 16). His insight into the mind of Christ and resulting delegated authority extended to the teaching in written form (Eph 3.3-5; see also Luke 1.1-4; Heb 2.3b-4).

In addition, the NT also shows that, while a church’s leaders were expected to share a letter’s teaching with the body and, upon occasion, exchange letters with another church (1 Thess 5.27; Col 4.16), in the first century there was no authoritative *collection* of writings to which all churches had access. Generally, with the exception of their letter[s], the teaching upon which each church relied was presented orally.

Why and how this changed is the next part of the story.

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Notes

¹ Frederick W. Danker, with Kathryn Krug, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 187. Some manuscripts, including the text behind the KJV, also use *kanōn* in Phil 3.16 where the essential point is the same as in Gal 6.16. But the weight of the evidence favors omitting it. See Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1991), 418.

² Walter Bauer notes that “in the second century in the Christian church κ[ανών] came to stand for revealed truth, *rule of faith*.” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament & Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 508.

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.1. In Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, Vol. I of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1885). See also *Against Heresies* 3.3.3.

⁴ Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Abingdon Press, 2005); expanded CD edition, 843-844. The revised edition, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Reference Edition* (Baylor University Press, 2017), contains the original’s expanded CD edition with updates throughout the text.

⁵ Regarding echoes of Jesus’s sayings, the epistle of James is instructive. See Dan McCartney’s list of 21 points of correspondence between the Sermon on the Mount/Plain and James in *James*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Baker Academic, 2009), 50-51.

⁶ The limit on the apostles’ authority is brought out in the more precise translation in the NASB: “whatever you bind shall have been bound ... whatever you loose shall have been loosed” (cf. NET, CSB). Note that Jesus said to all the apostles in Matt 18.18 what he said to Peter in 16.19.

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