
CHURCH HISTORY

“Now these things took place as examples for us...”

Lesson 7

The Apostolic Claim

1 Corinthians 2:10,13 - “these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God...And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”

1 Corinthians 14:37 - “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.”

2 Peter 3:2 - “I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.”

2 Thessalonians 2:15 - “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”

Galatians 1:12 - “For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Two Other Important Developments

- The History of the New Testament Books
- The Development of the Clergy and Monasticism

How Do We End Up with the 27 books in the New Testament

Since we recognize the new Testament as the full and final authority in all things religious, it is important we see when the New Testament writings came to be accepted.

Canon means rule or criterion. Thus the canon of the New Testament refers to the list of writings judged genuine. The widely accepted view is the official canon of the New Testament was determined by the church at The Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Many liberal scholars suggest the church rejected many other books simply because they did not teach the doctrines the church approved. In fact, many believe the understanding of Jesus as divine was not even generally accepted by the church for two centuries. This makes an historical examination of the formation of New Testament canon particularly relevant.

This is not an attempt to make arguments defending the 27 canonical books. It is rather a tracing of the process so we can see the early recognition of the accepted books.

The Situation in the Early Years of the Church

The New Testament claims that the Apostles and prophets were speaking the Word of God with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Letters were written by Spirit guided men like Paul, Peter, James, etc. The four gospels were written the same way by men who either accompanied Jesus personally (Matthew & John) or by men who knew the eyewitnesses and recorded their words (Luke & Mark).

Most of the NT writings are authored within the span of about 20-25 years finishing about 69 AD. John’s writings (the last surviving apostle), were probably written much later, in the 90’s. The question is when were they accepted by the church as inspired. If they are not recognized as inspired and authoritative for another 225 years, what did the early church follow?

Evidence of Early New Testament Books

References and quotations from individual New Testament Books are found before 110 AD in Rome, Macedonia, Achaia, Asia, Syria, and Asia Minor. Every New Testament book but Jude is referenced in some way in these parts of the empire.

Development of the list is a process.

The New Testament wasn't all composed, printed, and distributed the day after Pentecost. It will be at least 15 years before any of them are written. By 70 AD Christians are spread throughout the empire and beyond. So how did they follow the Word of God?

Remember the spiritual gifts. The gifts of prophecy and knowledge, passed on by the laying of the apostles' hands would cover a generation of the church. I do not see the passing out of these gifts as a rarity, with a mere handful of Christians possessing them. I believe there would be large numbers of prophets, etc., into the second century.

The early church knew who was inspired and who wasn't. They readily accepted the inspired writings from those recognized as apostles and prophets. However it took time for documents to reach out to all the world and circulate. Some arrived earlier to a particular region than others. There might have been some cultural biases that would have slowed acceptance of a particular letter or book. But, in time, the acceptance of the 27 books was pretty much universal.

Evidence for Early Acceptance of New Testament Writings.

There are several sources that show there was early acceptance of the New Testament writings. Sometimes confirmation come from the opposition.



In the 2nd century a man named Marcion (AD 96-160) from Pontus (modern Turkey) began to preach "another gospel." He holds the distinction of being regarded as the first great heretic of the early church. Expelled by his home church for adultery (where his own father served as a bishop) he began to develop his own form of "Christianity." He got rid of marriage and rejected the Old Testament as out of date. He went to

Rome in 144 AD and started an alternative Christian community. There he was expelled from the church for doctrinal heresy as he denied the essentials of Christianity and created his own Bible.

Marcion's Bible consisted of the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's letters, all "cleansed" of Old Testament influences. The books Marcion rejected he nonetheless acknowledged as being accepted by the church as a whole and as being written by the original apostles and prophets. He just thought he was right and they were wrong. The response to him was not a gentle one. Polycarp (AD 69-155) who knew the apostle John personally, upon meeting Marcion, called him "the first-born of Satan." Marcion's name remains infamous in church history to this day.

But understand the implications of the whole Marcion controversy. Because of Marcion the issue of what writings were inspired and authentic was raised over 150 years before the Council of Nicaea. It

The Magdalen College Greek Papyrus of Matthew.



These fragments were purchased in 1901 on the murky antiquities market of Luxor, Egypt, by Charles B. Huleatt. He donated them to his alma mater - Magdalen College in Oxford, England. It was dated from 180-200 AD and displayed in a case alongside Oscar Wilde's ring for decades. Almost a century later Dr. Carson P. Theide, an authority on ancient manuscripts (a papyrologist) relates the fragments to as early as 60 AD. Though his dating is widely opposed, many of the main objections are on philosophical grounds, not on archaeological evidence. If the dating is correct it would be the oldest fragment of a New Testament book.

indicates clearly that there was already a general agreement on what books were accepted by Christians as inspired by God. Marcion's influence caused churches to recognize a need to agree on a canon of scripture so that Marcion and others like him would not be able to challenge the divinely inspired books. Most conservative scholars recognize that the canon of scripture was pretty clearly set by the end of the 2nd century AD.

Marcion did something he never intended to do - leave clear evidence of what was accepted as New Testament scripture by Christians within a generation of those God used to write it.

Other Early Lists

Marcion is not the only one to refer to the books accepted by the early church. The Gnostic Gospel of Truth (ca. 140-150) cites a body of authoritative books that is "quasi-identical with the co-called later canon of the church." That further confirms there was a recognized body of scripture that existed before any gnostic gospels appeared.



The Muratorian Fragment is a Latin copy of a much earlier Greek document usually dated to the latter half of the second century. It is a canon list that

includes all the New Testament books except Hebrews, James and 1st & 2nd Peter. It includes references to all the New Testament books.

Another example is the Greek manuscript known as P45. It is dated about AD 200 and contains all four gospels together.

The Magdalen College Greek Fragments of Matthew's Gospel are from an early book that contains only the four biblical gospels. One scholar argues this collection comes from the first half of the second century. Another scholar, basing his arguments on ancient writing forms, dates it as early as the first century. There is a lot of recent solid scholarship that pushes the four Gospels much further back than some had wanted to believe.

How about the other writings many claim were rejected?

The Gnostic gospels, writings that claim a totally different kind of Jesus with gnostic influenced teachings, are clearly from a later period when gnosticism began to make significant inroads in the church in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries. Claims that the Gospel of Thomas was an early gospel from the first century has no historical or documentary evidence to back the claim. In fact, if the gospel of Thomas was in existence in the first century and known to early Christians, why didn't the heretic Marcion refer to it since it espouses some of the same doctrines he espoused? Marcion's silence about the Gospel of Thomas and any of the other Nag Hammadi "gospels" is again a powerful indictment of liberal scholars claims.

The Bible versus other Eastern Writings

Professor M. Monier-Williams was the Boden professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University over 100 years ago. He spent 42 years studying Eastern books. This is what he said in comparing them to the Bible:

"Pile them if you will on the far left side of your study table; but place your own Holy Bible on the right side - all by itself, all alone - and with a wide gap between them. For...there is a gulf between it and the so-called sacred books of the East which severs the one from the other utterly, hopelessly, and forever...a veritable gulf which cannot be bridged over by any science of religious thought."

The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers.

The term Apostolic Fathers is a phrase historians apply to some early Christians whose writings have survived to the present day. We discussed these men earlier. Remember these men lived in the late 1st century to the 3rd century A.D. Some of the more famous ones include Irenaeus, Polycarp (a personal friend of the apostle John), and Clement of Alexandria. Their extensive writings not only refer to all 27 books but quote from them extensively. In fact it has been said if every copy of the New Testament was destroyed, it could be recreated from the quotations found in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. I have a five volume set of these writings in my library as well as a topical dictionary of their writings. These writings are almost universally accepted as authentic. Since we essentially have the New Testament embedded in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, their testimony leaves no room to suggest the writings were changed at a later date or were not recognized as canonical. What is recorded in their writings is the text of the same New Testament we have today and it was accepted long before the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.

The Council of Nicaea addressed the matter of the canon because there were other writings that claimed to be inspired. Christians almost universally had come to understand they were not inspired and spurious. All the Council was doing was confirming what had been recognized for a long long time - the 27 books of our New Testament were the recognized inspired writings composing the Word of God for Christians.

The Rise of the Priesthood and Monasticism

The word "priest" is ultimately derived from the Greek word "presbyter." This should give us a hint from where the office arose. We have noted earlier in our study the development of the role of the bishop. Churches began to elevate one elder or bishop above the others. By the end of the 2nd century this practice was widely accepted. With the rise in honor and authority granted the bishop, he began to be designated to solely carry out certain church practices. Very early the bishop was the one designated to baptize converts and to administer the Communion. As many played major roles in defending the church against heresies, the bishop's prominence increased. It is from this practice that a special class of Christian leaders originated. Eventually the term "clergy" will be applied, though not for a millennium. (Today this transliterated Latin/Old French word is applied to the entire class of religious officials, from priests to pastors to bishops and beyond. They are not simply disciples but a special elevated class.)

By the end of the fourth century the power and authority of bishops is firmly established. It is bishops who are invited to the great councils to decide church doctrine (Milan in 325; Constantinople in 381). Their decisions are now to be followed by all churches. Over time, different levels of the office develop until today we have the varied hierarchical

Monte Casino



Monastery

Benedict is credited with founding the first monastery and order of Monks. His monastery, Monte Casino, stood until World War II, when it was bombed because Germans were using its elevated location as an observation point in the battle. The Germans believed the allies would not bomb it because it was valued as a highly sacred site by the West.

offices like priest, bishop, cardinal and pope. Their spiritual roles increase until they are considered to be the ones between the laity and Christ. The priest administers the sacraments. It is the priest to whom congregants confess and who determines if forgiveness is granted. All power resides in the officials of the church.

Monasticism

Another important development is the formation of the monastic orders. These are the source of monks, nuns and monasteries. By the third century there are those who decide to completely withdraw from society. Gnostic influences that taught that all material things were evil led to many Christians thinking that denial of all fleshly and material things was needful in order to achieve the highest level of spirituality. As the Roman culture and the influx of half converted pagans began to fill the churches, the desire for separation from the world was felt keenly by some. Out of this came the glorification of asceticism, the avoidance of all forms of indulgence and the practice of severe self discipline.

Anthony (about 251-356) is usually considered the founder of monasticism. At 20 years of age, he sold all his possessions, gave the proceeds to the poor and lived a life of isolation and meditation in a cave in Egypt, leading a life of meditation. He soon had many admirers who followed his example. Over time this way of life came to be honored throughout the church. Many began to organize into communities and by the end of the fifth century, many such communities can be found. The oldest surviving order was begun by Benedict of Nursia (480-543 AD). Vexed by the wickedness already prevalent in Rome, he retired to live as a hermit in a cave in the mountains east of Rome. He eventually established the monastery of Monte Casino. His monastery set the pattern of the practices of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The influence of the monks will be great in and out of the church from that time forward. Concurrent with this movement is the forming of likeminded women into similar orders - the genesis of nuns.

The orders were given legitimacy by the church taking them under its wing and exercising control over them. These orders will have positive and negative influences upon the society.

All these changes lead to a highly organized, rich, and powerful universal institution. It is truly a universal (catholic) organization that will become a major influence in western civilization for the next 1000 years.