

Sunday, November 21, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 10 The Patristic Period: The Formation of the Canon

### What is the Canon?

- The word “canon” is derived from a Greek word borrowed from the Phoenicians meaning a rod or ruler for measuring objects. (Noll, 34) The word was used as a standard for judging whether or not something is straight. (Shelley, 58)
- “So the idea was transferred to a list of books that constituted the standard or “rule” of the churches. These were the books read publicly in the congregations because they had the special authority of God upon them.” (Shelley, 58)
- “The first recorded use of the word for the authoritative list of books in the bible came in the year 367 from Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria in North Africa.” (Noll, 34)
- The conflict over which writings were truly authoritative can be seen while Paul and the other New Testament writers were still alive.
  - II Thessalonians 2:2—people were forging letters
  - Colossians 4:16—unclear what epistle Paul is referring to.
  - I Corinthians 5:9—not every letter Paul wrote was written under inspiration. Therefore they were not Scripture
- Finding its roots in the mind of the same God who formed the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the New Testament Church was never without a canon from the standpoint that they possessed the Old Testament. In Luke 24:44, Jesus fixes the canon of Old Testament Scripture.

<b>The Law (<i>Torah</i>)</b>	<b>The Prophets (<i>Neviim</i>)</b>	<b>The Psalms (<i>K'thuvim</i>)</b>
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs
Leviticus	Samuel	Job
Numbers	Kings	Song of Songs
Deuteronomy	Isaiah	Ruth
	Jeremiah	Lamentations
	Ezekiel	Ecclesiastes
		Esther
		Daniel
		Ezra-Nehemiah
		Chronicles

- Christians in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire rejected the canonicity of the 15 Apocryphal books. In contrast, Western Christians under the influence of Augustine received the Apocrypha as part of the Canon. (Shelley, 60) These differences still exist today between Catholics and Protestants.
- By seeking an authoritative collection of books, the New Testament Church affirmed its connection to Judaism by holding to a select list of sacred books. At the same time, the early Christians broke with their Jewish predecessors by claiming that the Hebrew

Scriptures were incomplete in themselves without the addition of the New Testament. (Noll, 34)

- In practical terms there are many reasons why a collection of authoritative books would have been necessary in the early church.
  - Standards of worship, prayer, and preaching
  - Reading material for public services and private study
  - Theological standard to use in responding to non-Christian critics
  - Deciding doctrinal disputes within their own ranks
  - Text to translate God's Word into the various language of the Greco-Roman world (Noll, 34)

### **Was Marcion a Heretic?**

- Any discussion of the New Testament canon will include a conversation about Marcion.
- According to the standard account presented in virtually all church history books Marcion was the son of a Bishop from a town on the southern coast of the Black Sea. As a young man Marcion became a ship owner, sailing passengers and cargo throughout the Roman world. During his travels Marcion supposedly developed distaste for the physical world and fell under the spell of a Gnostic teacher named Credo. (Jones, 24)
- Around 140, Marcion's father's church excluded the young ship-owner from fellowship. Some sources report that Marcion had seduced an unmarried girl in his father's church. While this is possible, the real reason for Marcion's banishment is probably related to his new belief system. (Jones, 24)
- Credo is said to have believed that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God and the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament, he said, was unknowable; the Christian God had been revealed. The Old Testament God was sheer justice; whereas the God of the New Covenant was loving and gracious. (Shelley, 62)
- After being banished from his father Church, Marcion fled to Rome where he further developed his ideas. While Marcion can never rightly be called a full fledged Gnostic he did borrow from Gnostic thought. (Jones, 24) Borrowing from Credo, Marcion held that the Old Testament God was full of wrath and the author of evil. This God, he said, was only concerned for the Jewish people. He was prepared to destroy all other people. In contrast, the Christian's God was a God of grace and love for all who disclosed himself in Jesus Christ, his Son. (Shelley, 62)
- Because he believed that the God of the Old Testament loved the Jews exclusively, Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and also those New Testament writings that he thought favored Jewish readers—for example Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Hebrews. He also rejected other Christian writings that appeared to compromise his own views, including 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. (Shelley, 63)
- In the end Marcion's Bible contained an altered version of Luke and ten letters of Paul. "The Apostle of the Gentiles, it seems, was the only apostle who did not corrupt the gospel of Jesus." (Shelley, 63)

- In 144, the church in Rome excommunicated Marcion at which time he established some of his own churches in Italy and Asia Minor. (Jones, 25)
- Writing around 180 AD Irenaeus states the following regarding Marcion's beliefs, "with regard to those who allege that Paul alone knew the truth and that to him the mystery was manifest by revelation, let Paul convict himself." (Bercot, 419)
- Tertullian states the following in 207 AD regarding what the Marcionites believed, "the Marcionites allege that Marcion did not so much innovate on the rule of faith by his separation of the Law and the Gospel, as restore it after it had been previously adulterated." (Bercot, 420)
- Bruce A. Shelley, author of *Church History in Plain Language* reports the following regarding Marcion's view of the Apostle Paul:
  - "Marcion's worship of Paul was little short of idolatry. As he saw it, Paul was the great enemy of the law and the great spokesman for the gospel. He was in fact the supreme figure in the church. Marcion believed Christ had descended from heaven twice, once to suffer and to die, and once to call Paul and to reveal to Paul the true significance of his death. In heaven, said Marcion, Paul sits at the right hand of Christ, who sits on the right hand of God.

As the North African lawyer Tertullian put it, Paul had become the apostle of the heretics." (Shelley, 63)

- In my view, we need to be very careful when passing judgment on Marcion. The things the church fathers say about Marcion are very similar to the things our critics say about us (mid-Acts, Pauline Grace Believers): we worship Paul, we don't use the entire Bible, we cut and mutilate the Bible, ect.
- If Marcion truly believed in two different Gods, and used a Bible that excluded the Old Testament and much of the New then Marcion was a heretic. However, I am not sure we can trust the testimony of men who we know were heretical when their teachings are compared with the writings of Paul.

### **Traditional View of the Canon**

- Church history books portray the Marcion episode as a catalyst for the early church to officially identify which New Testament books were authoritative canon and which ones were not.
- Most church history books offer some variation of the following three points as the criteria the early church used in determining the canonicity of disputed books.
  - *Is the book reliably connected to an apostle?* The logic behind this question was simple: The people most likely to tell the truth about Jesus were either eyewitnesses who had encountered Jesus personally or close associates of these witnesses. (Jones, 26-27)
  - *Do churches throughout the known world value this writing?*

- *Does the writing agree with what we already know about God?* (Jones, 26)
- When one uses these criteria to determine the authenticity of New Testament books three groups of books emerge that deserve further explanation.
- *Disputed Books*—of the 27 books of the New Testament 7 were disputed and there could not be admitted to the canon until later. These books include:
  - Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation
- Church historians lead their readers to believe that the majority of Bible-believing Christians “disputed” them because four or five “church fathers” don’t quote them. (Ruckman, 44)
- The Bible believer should not be surprised that these books were disputed when one considers their content: premillennial return of Christ, mark of the beast, identification of false prophets, and carnal church leaders.
- *Pseudepigrapha*—refers to those books that were never admitted into the New Testament canon. They are currently published in a book called *The Lost Books of the Bible* and include writings such as:
  - New Testament Apocrypha
    - *Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas (70-79 AD)*
    - *The Epistle to the Corinthians(96 AD)*
    - *The Gospel According to Hebrews (65-100 AD)*
    - *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (108 AD)*
    - *The Didache (Teaching of the Twelve) (100-120 AD)*
    - *The Seven Epistles of Ignatius (110 AD)*
    - *Second Epistle of Clement (120-140 AD)*
    - *Shepard of Hermas (115-140 AD)*
    - *Apocalypse of Peter (150 AD)*
    - *Epistle to the Laodiceans (4<sup>th</sup> Century)*
  - Pseudepigrapha (False Writings)
    - *The Acts of Andrew*
    - *The Apocalypse of Paul*
    - *The Epistle of Judas*
    - *Gospel of Peter*
    - *Gospel of Thomas*
    - *The Apocalypse of Paul*
    - *The Acts of Thaddeus*
    - *The Gospel of the Nativity of Mary*
    - *The Gospel of Nicodemus (Giesler, 536)*
- Sinaiticus manuscript used by the 1881 revision committee to “correct” the KJV in over 5,000 places contains New Testament Apocraphal books. Likewise, Codex Vaticanus contains Old Testament Apocrypha as part of the Old Testament text.

- *Homologoumena*—is the academic term used by church historians to indicate the 27 New Testament books that were accepted into the Canon of Scripture.
- Church tradition teaches that the Canon of was finalized at the Council of Carthage in 397 AD. Bible believers should out rightly reject this notion. The Council of Carthage was forced to recognize what God had already established: 27 inspired books.
- While the Old Testament was formed into a canon and preserved by an official priestly class (Tribe of Levi) the New Testament knows no priesthood except the priesthood of all believers. Therefore, any book written and preserved by New Testament Christians would be unofficial and subject to the universal acceptance of the body of Christ, apart from any ecclesiastical tribunal or council. Consequently, church historians have inserted into the real history of the early church the Catholic fiction of an official guardian of the canon. (cleaned up from Ruckman, 47)

### **Bible Believers View of the Canon**

- Since the church fathers quote the Holy Bible more than 35,00 times (19,368 from the Gospels alone), it is perfectly evident that the Book was around somewhere in the first three centuries of church history. In fact, Syrian and Old Latin translations containing the King James readings date from between 180-200 AD, 100 years before the Council of Carthage. (Ruckman, 41)
- What the Christians had between AD 100-325 were not the divinely inspired originals from the plenary verbal autographs. Rather they had preserved copies of the originals from which the church fathers quoted. (Ruckman, 50)
- Please consider the following quotation information from the church fathers:
  - *Polycarp (69-155)*—Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, 10 Epistles of Paul
  - *II Clement*—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and shows familiarity with Acts, Revelation, and 6 Pauline epistles
  - *Irenaeus (125-192)*—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 13 Pauline Epistles
  - *Clement of Alexandria (150-217)*—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Pauline Epistles, I Peter, I John, Hebrews, Jude, James, and Revelation. (Ruckman, 48)
- When these quotations are combined with those of Terullian we find all 27 New Testament books in use before 200 AD. With an Old Latin Version being quoted around 150-180 AD and an Old Syriac Version being quoted about the same time. (Ruckman, 48)
- There can be no doubt about the existence of the New Testament canon before 200 AD. The Churches had it, used it, copied it, and were already translating it into different languages.
- The 27 books of the New Testament were proven to be the inspired words of the living God by virtue of their own merit and the witness of their Author (Holy Spirit) to those words and those words only.

- When God set the nation of Israel aside the people who were responsible for the protection and preservation of the God’s Word changed. When Israel fell the job of Preservation passed from the scribes of the tribe of Levi into the hands of the New Testament prophets.
- Ephesians 4:11—we know that during the infancy stage of the Body of Christ, before the Word of God was complete the gift of prophecy functioned in the Body of Christ.
- Exodus 7:1—one of the functions of a prophet in the Word of God is to be God’s spokes person. A prophet also communicated God’s Word to his audience. “thus saith the Lord.”
  - Foretelling—means to predict the future.
  - Forthelling—means to deliver a message.
- I Corinthians 14:27-33—one of the functions of the gift of prophecy served for the body of Christ was to help identify what was God’s word from what was not. This one reason why once the word of God was complete the gift of prophecy passed away.
- Norman Geisler offers the following helpful chart regarding the Canon

<b>Incorrect View of Canon</b>	<b>Correct View of Canon</b>
Church Determines Canon	Church Discovers Canon
Church Is Mother of Canon	Church Is Child of Canon
Church Is Magistrate of Canon	Church Is Minister of Canon
Church Regulates Canon	Church Recognizes Canon
Church is Judge of Canon	Church is Witness of Canon
Church Is Master of Canon	Church is Servant of Canon (Geisler, 530)

### **Final Thoughts Regarding the Canon**

- When Paul wrote his last epistle Revelation and Inspiration ceased—Colossians 1:25
- Preservation and Illumination of the Scriptures continues in our day—Psalm 12:6-7, I Corinthians 2:13
- The New Testament prophets functioning within the local churches identified Scripture from now non-Scripture. These prophets continued the process of preservation through the meticulous copying of the manuscripts.
- By 200 AD the witness of God the Holy Spirit working through the New Testament prophets and Bible believing Christians after them had identified the contents of the Canon before 150 AD.

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