

Canon of Scripture

Lesson 9

I. Introduction

- a. Long before congregations of the fledgling Church declared a **canon** of the New Testament, other basic questions needed to be asked and answered:
 1. By what means ought the Christian faith be transmitted and **preserved**?
 2. By what **authority** are these doctrines taught and to whom is the authority conveyed?
 3. How were these articles of faith received by the early Church **fathers**?
 4. What is specifically meant by the **Gospel**?

II. Oral or Written?

- a. Jesus wrote no book: he taught by word of mouth and personal example. But some of his disciples did teach in writing as well as orally. So, the question of **transmission** and preservation became important to the followers of Christ.
- b. Since Jesus wrote no book, what he said was treasured and repeated by those who heard him and by their hearers in turn. To those who confessed him as Lord his words were as **authoritative** as those of Moses and the prophets.
- c. These oral traditions were 'delivered' by the original witnesses and 'received' in turn by others not simply as a **chronicle** of historical events but as the Church's specific confession of faith and as the message which it was commissioned to spread abroad. *Matt 28:19-20 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. KJV*
- d. In rabbinical schools which were **trained** to receive and deliver oral tradition 'without losing a drop,' the Christian tradition was meant to be imparted to a wider, more literate public. Thus, it needed to be written in order to assure accuracy for generations which followed.
- e. Some New Testament documents were designed from the outset to be passed on in written form. But in the ministry of the apostles their spoken words and their written words were **equally** authoritative. *2 Peter 3:15-16 Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. NIV*
- f. Had they not been written down, in all probability the spoken words would have been **lost**. Today, it is the written words alone that remain. Otherwise, we would have to be content with fragments of what was taught.
- g. Oratory was not an equal gift among the apostles. Paul understood that the power of his written word was **superior** to his own speaking ability. *2 Cor 10:10 For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible. KJV*
- h. It was both desirable and inevitable that the oral tradition should be committed to **writing** if the message was to be preserved for subsequent generations of the Christian Church.

III. Authority

- a. **Authority** precedes canonicity; had the words of the Lord and his apostles not been accorded supreme authority, the written record of their words would never have been canonized.
- b. Without the **God-given** authority to speak as the representative of God on earth, none of what Jesus taught, nor what his disciples taught after him, would have had any merit whatsoever. But Jesus claimed that he had that authority. *John 17:8 For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me. KJV*
- c. Subsequently, the apostles invoked the authority of Jesus for their teaching. Apostleship was recognized by fellow-Christians who acknowledged them as Christ's **agents**, speaking by his authority.
- d. The interpretation of the Old Testament writings by the apostles was as **binding** as the Old Testament writings themselves and their teaching was as authoritative as that which came from the Lord's own lips. *2 Cor 13:2-3 On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. NIV*
- e. But Paul makes a distinction between **his own** thoughts and the commands of the Lord when answering the Corinthians' detailed questions about marriage and divorce. *1 Cor 7:40 In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is — and I think that I too have the Spirit of God. NIV*
- f. **Peter** also acknowledges the authority of Paul as rising to the level of Scripture in his epistles. *2 Peter 3:16 His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. NIV*
- g. Paul's letters formed a recognizable **collection**, and were given the status of scripture. The question was whether or not they were added to the Old Testament, or did they constitute a new and distinct collection of 'scriptures'.

IV. Early Church Fathers

- a. Clement of Rome, in his letter to the Corinthian church (**AD 96**), quotes the words of Jesus as being at least on a level of authority with those of the prophets.
- b. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (**110 A.D.**), refers to some people who refuse to believe anything that is not recorded 'in the archives' (or 'in the charters', Old Testament scriptures), even if it is affirmed 'in the gospel'.
- c. Ignatius affirmed that his **ultimate** authority is Jesus Christ: *whatever authority the 'archives' (or 'charters') have is summed up and brought to perfection in the passion and resurrection of Christ. Christ was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise.*

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- d. Between AD 110 and 120, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, addressing the church of Philippi, said that the Philippians were 'well versed in the sacred letters' and equated Ephesians with Scripture.
- e. Additional evidence for the acceptance of NT teaching is seen about 170 A.D in the writing of Hegesippus after his journeys among the Mediterranean churches where he reported that *'in every church and in every city the preaching of the law and the prophets and of the Lord is faithfully followed'*.
- f. Evidence of another kind recorded by Eusebius, comes from Papias. He said he received the following information relating to Mark's Gospel from someone whom he calls 'the elder': *Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately all that he remembered, whether the sayings or the doings of the Lord, but not in order—for he had neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but followed Peter later on, as I said. Peter was accustomed to teach as occasion required, but not as though he were making a compilation of the dominical oracles.*
- g. Although Papias was aware of criticism of Mark's record because of its order of events, he said that Mark did not set out to write an orderly account: *his aim was to record in writing whatever Peter had to tell of the works and words of Jesus; and Peter simply mentioned from time to time those things which the circumstances of the moment required.*
- h. A generation after Papias, Justin Martyr, a native of Palestine who had become a Christian while residing in the province of Asia, but was now living in Rome, revealed his knowledge of the existence of a gospel collection.
- i. In his Dialogue Justin speaks of the 'memoirs' of Peter (the gospel of Mark) and in his First Apology he refers to the 'memoirs of the apostles'. These memoirs, he says, *are called gospels, and they are read in church along with the 'compositions of the prophets'*.
- j. After Justin's martyrdom (AD 165), his disciple, Tatian went back to Assyria, and there introduced what was to be for centuries a very influential edition of the gospels, called: Diatessaron.
- k. This word is a musical term, meaning 'harmony' of four. It was a continuous gospel- narrative, produced by unstitching the units of the four individual gospels and restitching them together in what was taken to be their chronological order.
- l. The gospel of John provided the framework into which material from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke was fitted. But in the Diatessaron, John's order of events was not followed precisely.
- m. Our earliest surviving relic of the Diatessaron is a vellum fragment in Greek from the third century, found among the ruins of a Roman fort at on the Euphrates.
- n. These quotations from early Church Fathers do not amount to evidence for a New Testament canon. But they do show that the authority of the Lord and his apostles was considered to be equal to that of the law and the prophets.
- o. In the first half of the second century, then, collections of Christian writings which would one day to be given canonical status were already taking shape—notably the fourfold gospel and the collection of Paul's letters.

V. The Fourfold Gospel

- a. Before the term 'gospel' came to be given to any single one of the four gospels it was used in four different ways:
 1. The good news of the kingdom of God preached by Jesus,
 2. The good news about Jesus preached by his followers after the first Easter and Pentecost,
 3. The written record of the good news current in a particular locality,
 4. The fourfold gospel.
- b. Ignatius used the term 'gospel', in his letter to the church of Smyrna as he preached against heretics: *the best defense against false teaching is 'to pay heed to the prophets and especially to the gospel, in which the passion has been revealed to us and the resurrection has been accomplished'*.
- c. Of the four gospels, John's took longer to win universal acceptance among catholic Christians than the others because some gnostic schools treated it as though it supported their positions.
- d. The earliest known quotation from John comes in the gnostic writer Basilides (130 A.D.); the earliest known commentary on John was written by the gnostic Heracleon (180 A.D.).
- e. However, Justin Martyr, who read John's Gospel more carefully, found that it supplied more effective anti-gnostic ammunition than any other New Testament book.
- f. The innovation of the codex form of book made it practical to bind all four gospel writings together. The earliest surviving codex containing portions of all four gospels is from the early third century. It contains Acts as well as the fourfold gospel.

VI. Application

- a. Scripture as written on codices was something very holy and mysterious possessed by the Church hierarchy in cathedrals and monasteries. In what ways might your Christian experience be different without your personal copy of Scripture?
- b. Imagine the number of people in the world today who have never heard the Bible stories nor read them. What if anything, can you do to respond to this situation?