

Canon of Scripture

Lesson 11

I. Attack on the Christian Scripture

- a. At the beginning of the fourth century it became a matter of concern to the churches in the Roman Empire that they be able to make the **distinction** between the writings which ranked as holy scripture and all others.
- b. On February 23, 303 AD, an imperial edict was posted, for implementation everywhere in the empire, requiring all copies of the Christian scriptures to be surrendered to the authorities for **destruction**.
- c. This was one of the measures which ushered in the **last** period of imperial persecution to be suffered by the church. There had been outbreaks of imperial persecution before, but the order for the surrender and destruction of the scriptures was something new.
- d. It marked the recognition of the vital role of the scriptures in Christian life and worship. Something similar had been attempted during the attempt by Antiochus **Epiphanes** to abolish the practice of Jewish religion about 167 B.C.
- e. He ordered that the books of the law be torn to pieces and destroyed by fire, and where the book of the covenant was found in anyone's possession, ... the king's decree condemned him to **death**' (1 Macc 1:56 f.).
- f. But in the later imperial decree, the Jewish scriptures were not threatened: it was the **New Testament** that was at risk, the Hebrew Bible remained unscathed.
- g. The **Septuagint**, which was by this time almost exclusively the property of the church, was placed in jeopardy by the imperial edict along with the New Testament writings.
- h. Nowhere in the empire was the edict put into more vigorous effect than in North Africa. The record has been preserved of an inquisition conducted by the mayor of **Cirta**, capital of Numidia, and his assistants.
- i. The **mayor** ordered the bishop to surrender the sacred books. The bishop replied that they were in the custody of the readers, whose names he was reluctant to give, saying that the municipal clerks knew them already.
- j. The readers and sub-deacons were questioned; when one of them proved not to be at home, his wife **handed over** his books, and the house was searched to make sure there were no other books remaining in the house.
- k. In the eyes of the church, to hand over the sacred books, even when death was the penalty for non-compliance, was regarded as a serious offence, practically equivalent to **apostasy**.
- l. Those who handed them over were called **traditores**, which literally means 'handers over', but it is the word from which 'traitors' is derived in modern English.
- m. When peace returned to the church, it had to be carefully considered whether traditores could be **restored** to communion and, if so, what forms of discipline they should be required to undergo.
- n. But often, a church possessed a variety of books, not all of them sacred books. In most cases the officials who called for the surrender of the scriptures were probably **unable** to distinguish the sacred books from others.
- o. If they did go away satisfied with a copy of the Shepherd of **Hermas** or a manual of church order, the church considered such handovers acceptable. Many non-canonical Christian writings were confiscated and destroyed during this period.
- p. But for the Christians who were ordered to hand over books it was important to be able to distinguish between which books must on no account be surrendered and those which were regarded as 'not worth **dying for**'.

II. Constantine's Fifty Bibles

- a. In AD 330, Constantine wrote to **Eusebius**, asking him to have fifty copies of the Christian scriptures (both Testaments in Greek) prepared for the use of the churches in the city of Constantinople.
- b. The fifty copies were to be made on good parchment by trained scribes: the emperor would defray the entire cost and **authorize** the use of two public carriages to transport the copies to Constantinople.
- c. Eusebius proceeded without delay to comply with the emperor's request: the scriptures were prepared as specified and sent in 'magnificent and elaborately **bound** volumes'.
- d. Only a quarter of a century earlier the Christian scriptures were being carefully sought out and destroyed by imperial authority. Now, they were not only tolerated, but they were being produced under imperial **authority**.
- e. The **Byzantine** text was most likely used for Constantine. This opinion is based on the popularity of the Byzantine form of text in Constantinople and the whole area of Christendom under its influence from the late fourth century on.
- f. The copies contained all the books which Eusebius had listed as universally acknowledged and the same twenty-seven books as appear in our copies of the New Testament **today**.

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- g. Constantine attached high importance to the book of the **Revelation** and he used its imagery for purposes of his own imperial propaganda.
- h. Many scholars believe that the fact that Constantine had ordered his copies of the both Testaments provided a considerable impetus within the Byzantine church towards the **acceptance** of the now familiar New Testament canon.

III. Augustine to the End of the Middle Ages

- a. **Augustine**, like Jerome, inherited the canon of scripture as something 'given'. It was part of the Christian faith which he embraced at his conversion in 386 A.D.
- b. While he received the twenty-seven books as they had been delivered to him, Augustine, like other Christian thinkers, considered the question: **Why** these, and no others?
- c. In his commentaries, he prefaced his **list** of canonical books with these observations: *Among the canonical scriptures he {the interpreter of the sacred writings} will judge according to the following standard:*
 - 1. To prefer those that are received by **all** the catholic churches to those which some do not receive.
 - 2. Again, among those which are not received by all, he will prefer such as are sanctioned by the **greater** number of churches and by those of greater authority to such as held by the smaller number and by those of less authority.
 - 3. If, however, he finds that some books are held by the greater number of churches, and others by the churches of greater **authority**, I think that in such a case the authority on the two sides is to be considered as equal.
- d. When Augustine wrote, it is plain no ecclesiastical council had made a pronouncement on the canon which could be recognized as the single voice of the church. The prestige of Jerome and Augustine ensured that their canon prevailed in the **west**.
- e. However, the distinction between those books which were received by all and those which were disputed by some was not entirely forgotten. Notwithstanding this lack of unanimity, the issue remained dormant for the next **1100 years**.

IV. Councils of Hippo and Carthage

- a. The Council of Hippo (393 A.D.) was probably the **first** church council to lay down the limits of the canon of scripture. Its specific statements no longer exist, but its statement on the canon was repeated as Canon 47 of the Third Council of Carthage in 397 A.D.
- b. The Sixth Council of Carthage (419 A.D.) **restated** the resolution of the Third Council regarding the canon of scripture, and added a note directing that the resolution be sent to Boniface I, Bishop of Rome and other bishops.
- c. The statement they issued read: *Let this be made known also to our brother and fellow-priest Boniface, or to other bishops of those parts, for the purpose of **confirming** that Canon {Canon 47 of the Third Council}, because we have received from our fathers that these are the books which are to be read in church.*
- d. The question of the canon of the New Testament was more or less settled in the Church and did not arise again **until** the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

V. Application

- a. Under the threat of persecution and sometimes death, Christians have at various times been required to answer for themselves: for what am I willing to die? How would you answer that question?
- b. Even today in many countries around the world believers are faced with that same question. In the United States, religious liberties are being eroded by encroaching government regulations.
- c. Lest you think that this could never happen in the U.S. consider this: *Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli said on a radio program Wednesday that going to jail may be an effective way to protest a mandate tied to ObamaCare that requires employers to provide contraceptive coverage.*
- d. At what point do you feel that you must take a personal stand? What would that look like?

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Secret Christian	Publicly Practice Up to a point	Endure Persecution	Accept Prison	Endure Beating	Welcome Death