

## LESSON FOUR – Canon, Creed and Apostolic Succession

### Introduction

- Christian converts were from many different backgrounds and this caused various interpretations of the message of Christianity. This should not be a surprise, at this time Christianity was still lacking a cohesive definition in a cultural context where people were used to religious syncretism.
- While many claimed the name of Christ, some construed that name in a manner that others felt obscured or even denied the core of Christ's message.
- In response, what would become orthodox Christianity began to define itself by reaffirming elements from its Jewish heritage.
  - o Creation
  - o The positive value of the created world
  - o God's Sovereignty over creation
  - o The resurrection of the body
  - o The final reign of God
- In order to affirm these doctrines, the church developed a series of instruments that would set limits of orthodoxy.
  - o Creeds
  - o Canon of Scripture
  - o Apostolic Succession

### Canon

- Marcion's list (revised Gospel of Luke, 10 Pauline Letters) was the first attempt to put together a New Testament.
- When early Christians spoke of the Scriptures what they were referring to was the Hebrew Scriptures, usually the Septuagint.
- It was customary to read passages from one or several of our four present Gospels, as well as from the Epistles, usually Paul's.
- There was no universally accepted list. Different Gospels and Letters were read in different churches.
- Marcion's challenge to the Hebrew Scriptures required a response from the church and this led to the compiling of a list of sacred Christian writings.
- The list was not compiled in an official manner through a council or meeting but was a gradual process. There was a consensus to the basic books but it took awhile to come to a full agreement on what books belonged in the New Testament canon.

## The Old Testament

- There was no question, except among the Gnostics and Marcion, that the Hebrew Scriptures were part of the Christian canon.
- The Hebrew Scriptures were important proof that God had been preparing the way for the advent of Christianity, and understanding the nature of God, who had been revealed in Jesus Christ. The Christian faith was the fulfillment of the hope of Israel.
- By the time Christianity came onto the scene the main lines of the Hebrew canon were clearly drawn.
- Of the three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, the law, the prophets and the writings, the limits of the first two were firmly established but evidence seems to suggest there was not the same level of certainty on the third part at the time of Jesus.
- Although there are arguments to be made of it being fairly well determined, there was some doubt among the Jews about a handful of the books, such as Esther, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon.
- Some books not included in the Hebrew canon of Scripture were highly regarded, Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon and I Enoch. These books achieved Deutero-canonical or apocryphal status among the Christians. I Enoch was included in the canon of the Ethiopian Church.
- In the manuscripts of the Septuagint preserved by Christians there was often included a varying number of books not found in the Hebrew canon of Scripture.
- There was no common agreement on which of these books counted as canonical. It was not until the Reformation, when Protestants insisted on limiting the Old Testament to the thirty-nine books accepted by the Jews, that the Roman Catholic Church made an official determination of which books would be included in its Old Testament.
- Those books are called the Apocrypha by the Protestants and Deutero-canonical by the Roman Catholics.
- The Eastern Orthodox church accepts, in addition to the Roman Catholic Deutero-canonical books, I Esdras, the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151 and 3 Maccabees.
- Early Christian scholars who researched the matter listed the Old Testament books according to the Hebrew canon. The earliest we know who did so was Melito of Sardis, in the second century and his list corresponds to the Hebrew Scriptures with the absence of Esther. Jerome also argued for the Hebrew canon and the exclusion of the apocryphal books.
- Origen and Augustine argued for a broader Hebrew canon.
- Athanasius took an intermediate approach and accepted the Hebrew canon with the exception of Esther.
- The consensus of many regarding the Old Testament was that they acknowledged the Hebrew canon and were in common agreement on nearly all the books in its collection.

## The New Testament

- The Gospels were the first to gain recognition. It is important to acknowledge that the early Christians included more than one Gospel in their canon. As contact increased in the early church, they began sharing manuscripts and the use of various Gospels came to be seen as unity of the church.
- The early Christians were well aware of the differences in the Gospels and that was the reason they insisted on using more than one Gospel. Many Gnostic teachers claimed that the heavenly messenger had trusted his secret knowledge to a particular disciple, who alone was the true interpreter of the message.
- Various Gnostic groups had a book that claimed to present the true teaching of Jesus. The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Truth for the Valentinian Gnostics. Marcion used the Gospel of Luke, from which he removed all the references to Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures.
- The church sought to show that its doctrines were not based on the supposed witness of a single apostle or Gospel, but on the consensus of the entire apostolic tradition.
- The fact that the various Gospels differed in matters of detail but agreed on the basic issues at stake, made their agreement a more convincing argument.
- The fourth Gospel was slower to gain universal acceptance.
- Against the secret traditions of the Gnostics, the church had recourse to an open and transparent tradition.
- In the first four or five centuries of Christianity there were dozens of writings about the act of Mary and the apostles. It is not true that those writings were trying to find their way into the canon and that the church tried to suppress them.
- The non-canonical books fall into two categories. Some of them dating mostly from the second century, with the possible exception of the Gospel of Thomas, are Gnostic Gospels. They were never considered canon by the orthodox Christian community. The second category, mostly dating from the third century or later, were pious stories about Jesus. The church never rejected these; they simply did not include them in the canon of the New Testament.
- Next to the Gospels, Acts and Pauline Epistles received early recognition. By the end of the second century the core of the canon was established.
- On the shorter books that appear toward the end of the present canon, there was no consensus until a much later date; but there was little debate over them.
- It was in the second half of the fourth century that a complete consensus was achieved regarding exactly which books ought to be included in the New Testament canon.
- Athanasius was the first to record a list of canonical books identical to our present canon of the twenty-seven New Testament books.
- Non-heretical, non-canonical books: the Acts of Paul, Shepherd, Apocalypse of Peter, Barnabas and the Didache.
- Heretical, non-canonical books: the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Matthias, the Acts of Andrew and the Acts of John.

- The attitude of the church seems to have been that inspiration was assumed as the minimum requirement.
- Apostolic authorship was not insisted upon since Luke was not an apostle but he traveled with Paul and moved in apostolic circles, so his books are considered to have apostolic authority.
- Any books unable to be proven to be written during the time of the apostles were rejected.
- Requirement for canonicity was that the writing had to be applicable to the whole church. Even though many New Testament letters were written to a specific church their message was useful to the universal church. Non-canonical works were rarely read in the assemblies.
- The organized church did not create the canon, they recognized it. Church councils did not enter the discussion until the later phases.
- The church functioned as a witness and not a judge in the process of canonization. The church gave us the Bible in the sense that it received and preserved the sacred Scriptures.
- The recognizing of the canon was an act by the church of placing itself under the authority of Scripture.

## Creed

- Another part of the response to heresy was the use of various creeds, especially in baptism.
- One of these creeds was an earlier and shorter form of the Apostle's Creed. The basic text of the creed was put together around 150 AD, probably in Rome. At this time, it was a symbol of faith.
- It was means that Christians used to distinguish true believers from those who followed the various circulating heresies.
- One of the main uses of this creed was in baptism, where it was presented to candidates in a series of questions.

**“Do you believe in God, the Father almighty?”**

**“Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Ghost and of Mary the Virgin, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again at the third day, living from among the dead, and ascended unto heaven and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the quick and the dead?”**

**“Do you believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Church, and the resurrection of the flesh?”<sup>1</sup>**

- This creed, like most ancient creeds, was built around the Trinitarian formula used in baptism.
- This early creed was directed against Marcion and the Gnostics. Each part of the creed addressed a specific heresy in those groups regarding the Trinity.
- Churches that had a strong connection with Rome used variant forms of this creed but the churches in the East had their own creedal formulation.

- Although the canon of the New Testament and the various creeds were valuable instruments against heresy, the debate finally came down to the issue of the authority of the church. This was important because there were serious issues at stake.
- Against Marcion and the Gnostics, the true church at large claimed to be in possession of the original gospel and the true teaching of Jesus.

## **Apostolic Succession**

- The notion of apostolic succession became very important at this time. If the apostles had received any secret teachings, they in turn would have passed it on to those who were to follow them. But those who could, in the second century claim to be direct disciples of the apostles, denied the existence of any secret teachings.
- To strengthen this argument, it was necessary to show that the bishops of the second century were indeed successors of the apostles. This was not difficult since most churches kept records of bishops linking them with the apostles.
- This did not mean that only churches that could show apostolic connection were truly apostolic. It was only necessary that they all agreed on one faith and could jointly prove that this faith was apostolic in origin.

## **The Ancient Catholic Church**

- The word catholic means universal but it also means according to the whole. To separate itself from the various heretical sects, the ancient church began calling itself “catholic.”
- This title underscored universality and the inclusiveness of the witness on which it stood.
- It was the church according to the whole, that is according to the witness of all the apostles and all the evangelists.
- This is the reason why catholic eventually became a synonym for orthodox or correct teaching.
- Over many years, debates regarding the true meaning of catholic came to be centered on the person and authority of a single apostle – Peter.

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<sup>1</sup> The Story of Christianity, Gonzalez, Justo L., page 77