

the flesh is naturally corrupt, but those who gain a special “knowledge (*gnosis*)” can live however they want and still be saved. Gnostics taught that Jesus did not actually come in the flesh but simply appeared to have a fleshly body. They believed the God of the Old Testament was not the Father of Jesus and viewed wicked people in Scripture as heroes and the righteous as villains.

To support their false doctrines, the Gnostics composed their own fraudulent texts such as the *Gospel of Judas*, that claimed Judas was the most faithful disciple. Their text called the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* claimed, “There is no sin. It is you who make sin exist, when you act according to the habits of your corrupted nature” (p. 7, lines 15-19). Many of those who accepted

these false doctrines actually began to alter New Testament texts to fit their skewed beliefs. Around AD 180 a Christian named Irenaeus rebuked the false teachings of a Gnostic named Marcion. According to Irenaeus Marcion, “Mutilates the gospel which is according to Luke,” claiming that he deleted passages in the gospel that list the genealogy of Jesus. He claimed Marcion, “dismembered the epistles of Paul” and “dared openly to mutilate Scriptures” (*Against Heresies*, 1. 27.2, 4).

These concerted efforts to edit and change New Testament texts and forge false religious texts motivated many who rejected these heresies to move forcefully to oppose Gnostic writings and teachings. God never authorized religious councils aimed at setting official doctrine, but in response to false doctrines such as Gnosticism councils and “canon lists” began to be published spelling out what Christians considered to be the full revelation of New Testament Scripture. These did not *determine* the New Testament canon, they simply expressed what Christians already recognized about New Testament books in order to combat false teaching. Some of these have survived. The Synod of Laodicea (AD 343-381) and the Letter of Athanasius (AD 367) essentially list the books we all still use in our New Testaments. Councils in Hippo (AD 393), Carthage (397 AD), and Rome (AD 405) would acknowledge these same lists. These should not be seen as determining what was in Scripture, but simply stating what was already understood to be the case.



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Welcome Visitors

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ISSUE

19.28

BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

July 9,
2017

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter

Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon

Ryan Ferguson

Arend Gressley

Ben Hight

Blake McAlister

Brady McAlister

Walker McAnear

Sam Nunn

Lance Purcell

Rusty Scott

Justin Smiley

Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



“Once for All Delivered to the Saints”

How the Bible Came to Us (8)

By Kyle Pope

Two New Testament books were written by brothers of Jesus who became disciples following His resurrection: James and Jude. In the opening verses of Jude’s epistle he wrote, “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3, NKJV). Does the New Testament constitute the full revelation of God concerning the Christian faith, “which was once for all delivered to the saints”? In earlier lessons we saw the term *canon* meaning, “measuring line,” used of the complete revelation of Scripture. We looked at evidence pointing to a closed *canon* of the books that constitute the Old Testament. We must now consider similar issues about the New Testament.

New Testament Books in Early Christian Writings

An important evidence of the authority and completion of the New Testament canon is seen in the way early Christians used these texts. Only a few years after the last books of the New Testament were written Christians began to look to them as sources of authority. Around AD 96 a Christian from Rome named Clement wrote to the church in Corinth. In urging them to be united he called them to remember the, “epistle of the blessed Paul the apostle,” speaking of, “what he

wrote to you in the beginning of the Gospel” (*To the Corinthians* 47.1). Clement appeals to what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 1:12 and 3:22. At the beginning of the Second Century a Christian named Ignatius from Antioch, the city where disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26), wrote a letter to the church in Philadelphia (in Asia Minor). In his epistle he urged the saints to take “refuge” in the “gospel,” in the “apostles,” and in “the prophets” (*To the Philadelphians*, 5). In speaking of the “prophets” he was likely referring to the Old Testament books of prophecy which, “anticipated the gospel in their preaching” (*ibid.*). Shortly after these words he wrote, “...If I don’t find it in the original documents, I don’t believe it is in the gospel” (*To the Philadelphians*, 8). Since he had just charged them to take “refuge” in the gospel, apostles, and prophets, by “original documents” he likely means the books of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and the writings of the apostles.

This special authority in which early Christians held New Testament books is also seen in how they used them in worship. Around AD 150 a Christian named Justin, in a letter written to the emperor defending faith in Christ, gives the fullest description of Christian worship after the New Testament. After discussing other elements of worship he claimed, “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits” (*First Apology*, 67). Like Ignatius, Justin indicates that early Christians viewed New Testament books on an equal par with Old Testament books. They were not viewed as the writings of common men—they were consulted as a source of authority.

In these early years, some people were still alive who had actually known the apostles. Around AD 120, a Christian named Papias from Hierapolis (near Colosse) claimed that he made it his practice to consult these people in order to determine doctrine. He claimed, “...I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of the living and surviving voice” (as quoted in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.16). Although Papias’ judgment is flawed in considering this “surviving voice” of greater value than “information from books,” his words show us how early Christians viewed New Testament books. Papias is actually one of the earliest writers that addressed the authorship of New Testament books (*ibid.*). So, in spite of his comments on the “living” and “surviving voice” he makes it clear that Christians in his day already considered New Testament books authoritative texts. As these living witnesses to the work of the apostles died, New Testament books became the unchanging source of teachings about Christ and His doctrine.

Not only do early Christians use New Testament books in worship and as a source of authority, but they extensively quote from them in their writings. Commenting on the massive number of New Testament quotations found in early Christian writings the Greek scholar Bruce Metzger, in his book, *The Text of the New Testament*, observes, “Indeed, so extensive are these citations that if all other sources of our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament” (86).

What Made New Testament Books Special?

If early Christian writers considered these books an inspired standard, on what basis did they do so? The book of Acts records that after the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles on the Day of Pentecost they were given the power to lay hands on other Christians in order to grant them spiritual gifts (see Acts 8:14-19). This gave to the one who received it miraculous abilities that helped churches become “established” in the faith (Rom. 1:11). These were never intended to continue throughout the centuries, but only operated until the full revelation of the gospel was completed (1 Cor. 13:8-10). One who had received the laying on of the apostles’ hands could not lay hands on another person to pass this gift on to them.

Not all of the apostles wrote books or letters, but some did. Obviously a text written by an apostle of the Lord, who was led by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in what he wrote, would be held in great esteem by early Christians. These texts very quickly began to be circulated, copied, and used in the churches. Most New Testament books were written by apostles. A few, like Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, James, and Jude were written by inspired men who were closely associated with the apostles. Mark and Luke, for example, traveled with Paul (2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24). James and Jude, as noted earlier, were the Lord’s brothers and leaders in the church in Jerusalem (Matt. 13:55; 1 Cor. 9:5). God in His providence preserved these texts and the early church recognized them as the inspired standard to be followed.

Books after the New Testament

As these gifts of the Holy Spirit began to fade with the passing of the apostles and those upon whom they laid hands, Christians still wrote to teach their faith. There are a number of texts written after the New Testament that discuss faith in Jesus but these were never viewed with the same authority as New Testament books. These early writings fall into two dis-

tinct categories: *Early Christian Writings* and *Gnostic Writings*.

Early Christian Writings represent surviving letters and doctrinal essays written by Christians in the years immediately following the death of the apostles and the writing of New Testament books. The earliest of these, sometimes called the *Apostolic Fathers*, were written by some who actually knew the apostles. One writer, for example named Polycarp, grew up hearing the teachings of the apostle John. While these texts show the beginnings of some early departures from biblical doctrine, they largely echo what is taught in the New Testament. While it is clear that early Christians valued these texts they were not considered inspired or of equal value with New Testament books. This is clear from the fact (as noted above) that many of these texts quote New Testament books as a source of authority.

In contrast to this, Gnostic writings reflect deliberate attempts to reject sound doctrines regarding Christ, salvation, and the nature of God. In the centuries after the New Testament Gnosticism began to teach that