

# The Bible: God's Redemptive Words

## Lesson 7: The Canon: The Books that Belong in the Bible II

### Intro

- Thus far we have discussed that the Old Testament expected the revelation of new Scriptures from the Lord once He established His New Covenant.
- These new Scriptures described themselves as possessing the same authority as the OT Scriptures and that is how the early church received them.
- So what evidence from history do we have concerning how the New Testament Scriptures imposed themselves on, and shaped the New Covenant community (aka, the Church)?

### How did the early Church respond to this?

- Immediately in the earliest writings that we possess we see people who knew the apostles personally describing their writings as "Scripture."
- And with equal speed we see the bulk of the NT books imposed themselves on the church which affirmed their Divine origin almost unanimously right away.
- There is no record of early disputes over the books that were known to have been handed down by the Apostles:

#### **Michael Kruger**

They were received not so much because they measured up to some standard of orthodoxy but primarily on the basis of their obvious apostolic origins – these were books "handed down" by the apostles... "The letters of Paul and the Synoptic Gospels had been valued so long and so widely that their orthodoxy could only be taken for granted: it would have been nonsensical for the church to have inquired, for example, into the orthodoxy of Paul!"<sup>1</sup>

- When disputes arose over a few NT books, they arose much later when various heresies began trying to use certain books to their advantage. This then caused questions about the canonicity of some of these books in the minds of a few. But they were few indeed:

#### **Herman Ridderbos**

There was never any discussion of the canonicity of the majority of the New Testament writings. The church never regarded those writings as being anything but the authoritative

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origin and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 139. Kruger quotes from Harry Gamble, "Literacy, Liturgy and the Shaping of the New Testament Canon," in *The Earliest Gospels*, ed. Charles Horton (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 70.

witness to the great time of redemption...[T]he church did not begin making formal decisions about what was and was not canonical or by erecting specific scientific criteria of canonicity. Rather, the way that canon attained its position of authority in the church is historical evidence that these writings were never understood by the church except as its foundation in the redemptive historical apostolic sense...Uncertainly about *some* of those writings it should be noted, only arose later as a result of certain actions that occurred within or against the church.<sup>2</sup>

- However, as Ridderbos notes, the result of the attacks of false teachings on the church, only served to strengthen its confidence in the truth of what God had revealed to them in the NT Scriptures:

When attacked by all sorts of heresies, the church's certainty about the writings it had received resulted in an even stronger more persistent certainty. That strengthened certainty, in turn, made the church all the more critical of anything that deviated from those writings and, in some instances, even more critical than later appeared to be necessary.<sup>3</sup>

- From their correspondence with one another we can see that as they were seeking to discover what God had revealed as His new Covenant documents, they looked for three things:

#### **1. Adherence to the "Rule of Faith"**

- This refers to the notion that God will not contradict Himself so that whatever he reveals must be consistent with what He has taught elsewhere in His Word.
- This expression is sometimes called "the Canon of Truth" or the "Rule of Truth" but the meaning is the same.<sup>4</sup>
- Thus God's Word authenticated itself in this manner and false documents were weeded out for being at odds with what God had already revealed.

#### **2. Apostolicity**

- This did not mean that an NT book had to be written by an apostle, but rather that it had to have been overseen by an apostle. As Michael Kruger explains:

The function of the apostolate was to make sure that the message of Christ was firmly and accurately preserved for future generations, through the help of the Holy Spirit, whether written by its members directly or through a close follower of theirs. In the end, the New Testament canon is not so much a collection of writings by apostles, but rather a collection of apostolic writings – writings that

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<sup>2</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1988), 40-44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 251-252..

bear the authoritative message of the apostles and derive from the foundational apostolic era (even if not directly from their hand).<sup>5</sup>

- Thus books like Mark (a transcription of Peter’s teachings) and Hebrews (likely overseen by Paul but written Luke or another of Paul’s companions) can still bear apostolic authority because it passes on consistently what the Apostles had received from God, even though Mark and Luke weren’t apostles themselves.
- So this is quite similar to the Rule of Faith in that what God revealed through His Apostles by necessity was to be accepted as His Word; thus works that did not come from an apostolic source were rejected as arising not from the Lord established means.

### 3. The testimony of the Church

- This must carefully be distinguished from the unbiblical notion of the Church *establishing* what the NT is by its own authority.
- Instead what this refers to is the idea that the early churches conversed among themselves to see how these writings had authenticated themselves in the church at large.
- **It is crucial to see, however, that this is purposefully the third link in the chain and can only exist if the first two are established.** In other words, the first two bring about this third criterion; it’s not the other way around.
- So, for example, though the Epistle to the Hebrews was disputed by some because of its unknown authorship, Jerome (347-420) could nevertheless say:
 

It does not matter who is the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for in any case it is the work of a church-writer and is constantly read in the churches.<sup>6</sup>
- Thus Jerome's argument is:
  - Since its content is shown to be consistent with the Rule of Faith and it dates from the apostolic era (“the work of a church-writer”)
  - Its consistent impact on and reception by God’s people should end discussion.
- As NT scholar Ned Stonehouse helpfully explained:
 

Although the church lacks infallibility, its confession with regard to the Scriptures represents not mere opinion but an evaluation which is valid as derived *from*, and

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Kruger, *The Heresy of Orthodoxy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 117.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Metzger, 253.

corresponding *with* the testimony of the Scriptures to their own character. The basic fact of canonicity remains, then, the testimony which the Scriptures bear to their own authority. But the historian of the canon must recognize the further fact that the intrinsic authority established itself in the history of the Church through the government of its divine head.<sup>7</sup>

- As we already discussed, ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who authenticates the truth of the Word of God in the heart to the mind of every Christian. How much more, then, the corporate authentication that He produces in the life of the church?

### What is the evidence we have from the early church?

#### Clement of Rome (considered the first of the church fathers)

- According to several early church fathers he was the friend of Paul who is mentioned in Philippians 4:3.
- The Epistle of Clement to the Corinthian church (often referred to as “1 Clement”) was written no later than **95 AD**. In this letter he commends the Corinthian church to:
 

Take up the epistle of that blessed apostle, Paul. What did he write to you at first, at the beginning of his proclamation of the gospel? To be sure, he sent you a letter in the Spirit concerning himself and Cephas and Apollos, since you were even then engaged in partisanship.<sup>8</sup>
- He quotes, as authoritative, portions of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke
- He makes reference to Paul’s letters of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians.
- He quotes and alludes to the Book of Hebrews quite a bit, and makes veiled references to the books of Acts, James and 1 Peter.

#### The Didache (c. AD 100)

- The *Didache* known as “the teaching of the apostles” is an early manual of Christian belief and practice
- When teaching on prayer it says:
 

Nor should you pray like the hypocrites, but as the Lord commanded in his gospel, you should pray as follows, “Our Father in heaven...”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> N. B. Stonehouse, “The Authority of the New Testament,” in *The Infallible Word*, ed. Stonehouse and Paul Wooley (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1967, repr. 2002), 139-140; see also Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, 105-106.

<sup>8</sup> *1 Clement*, 47.1-3, quoted in Kruger, *Heresy of Orthodoxy*, 136.

<sup>9</sup> *Didache*, 8.2, quoted in Kruger, 139.

- Not only does the document go on to quote the rest of the Lord's Prayer from Matt 6:9-13, but refers to it as the Lord's "Gospel."
- Additionally, later on it includes what is known as an "inscriptional curse." These are found frequently at the end of Ancient Near Eastern covenant documents to warn anyone from altering the wording of the covenant documents in any way.
- Deu 4:2 as well as Rev 22:18-19, are two places in Scripture where God has placed "inscriptional curses for tampering with His covenant documents as well.
- The *Didache*, after quoting from Matthew includes the following curse:
  - Do not abandon the commandments of the Lord, but guard what you have received, neither adding to them, nor taking away from them.<sup>10</sup>
- What is intriguing here is that if the *Didache* is including inscriptional curses against changing the wording of the Gospel of Matthew, then clearly Matthew had "Covenant document" status in the minds of the authors, equal to OT.

#### **Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110)**

- This very influential church father referred to a collection of all of Paul's epistles as authoritative.<sup>11</sup>
- He quotes Paul often, mostly from 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Romans, but also references, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians.<sup>12</sup>
- He quotes and/alludes to Matthew, Luke and John.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (69- 155)**

- In the year 110 Polycarp, (who was a personal disciple of the Apostle John), wrote a letter to the church in Philippi exhorting them to hold fast to the truth in the face of heresy and persecution.
- Toward this goal he commended the study of the Scriptures and in doing so included 112 references to the Bible. **What is intriguing here is that of these 100 were from the NT and only 12 from the OT.**<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Didache*, 4.13, in Kruger, 140.

<sup>11</sup> Kruger, 141.

<sup>12</sup> Metzger, 44-49.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-49.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

- In addition to this he regularly interacts with Paul's letters, referring to the book of Ephesians as "Scripture" and citing portions of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians and 1 & 2 Timothy.
- He also interacts with Hebrews, 1 Peter and 1 John, and directly quotes from Matthew, Mark and Luke calling the words he quotes as "what the Lord taught."<sup>15</sup>
- In another informative statement, Polycarp said:
 

Let us then serve Him in fear, and with all reverence, even as He Himself has commanded us, and as the apostles who preached the Gospel unto us, and the prophets who proclaimed beforehand the coming of the Lord.<sup>16</sup>
- This is significant because here is another example of an early church father putting the writings of the apostles on par with the very word of God and with the Old Testament prophets.

#### **Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (60-130)**

- Papias was a very early church father who, more than most, worked intensely on collecting as much historical data as possible concerning the life and work of Christ.
- He personally knew the apostle John and was also a friend of Polycarp.
- Next to none of his work survives and what we have is recorded for us in quotes from other early works that cite him.
- In what we have of his work it is likely that as early as 125 AD, the "fourfold gospel" was already known and being defended as authoritative.<sup>17</sup>
- He also interacts with 1 Peter, 1 John and Revelation.<sup>18</sup>
- One fragment interestingly shows the care that the early church had in examining the accuracy and authority of what became the NT books:

#### **Papias**

This also the presbyter [the Apostle John] said: Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things done or said by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>16</sup> Polycarp, *The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians* (Ante Nicene Fathers vol. II) ed. Alexander Robertson & James Donaldson et al, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 6.3.

<sup>17</sup> Kruger, 149.

<sup>18</sup> Metzger, 54.

to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely.<sup>19</sup>

- So here is another example of how books not penned specifically by apostles, nevertheless were defended as being apostolic because of the origin in the teachings of the apostles.
- Thus, God left us abundant historical evidence centering how His Word imposed itself upon His New Covenant people and by doing so, shaped the Church.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* (Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series vol. VIII) ed. P. Schaff et al, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 3.39.14-17.