

First and Second Christian Centuries (9/7/18, TCP)

Development of the Church (geographically, socially, structurally, vs. empire)

Characters: Clement, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus

Development of the Canon

Our “Origin Story” in the First Century

- Starts with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
- Pentecost and the early church (Acts, letters)
 - Jewish: with temple worship and the Eucharist
 - Dispersed from Jerusalem, including Antioch
 - Gentiles: “Council of Jerusalem” (Acts 15) deals with how to integrate them
- Growth: Paul and others evangelizing: first in the synagogue, then to the Gentiles
 - With connections to Jerusalem, Antioch (and later Rome and Alexandria)
- Jewish & Gentile Christians
 - Sorting out how to live as Christians (and in a pagan world, and together)
 - Men & Women, slaves & masters (slaves were a significant contribution)
 - Pacifist and not in civic office due to pagan practices
 - Persecuted if not willing to worship the emperor or other gods (and not protected by exceptions for Jews)
- Patrons provided gathering places (“to Philemon... and the church in your house”)
- Overseers (bishops), Elders (presbyters), Deacons led and served
- By ~100, we see the primacy of bishops, supported by deacons and councils of elders.
- Issues among Christians were addressed chiefly by letters from leaders to churches, including churches of other cities. Indicates a mutual responsibility to each other.

Clement ~96, writes to the church in Corinth, appeals for unity, quotes heavily from NT writings, emphasizes leaders, but uses “bishops” and “presbyters” somewhat interchangeably.

Ignatius of Antioch, in 107, writes seven letters to churches while he travels to Rome to be martyred. Also uses NT literature heavily. He emphasizes the singular authority of the bishop. His language is heavily eucharistic, and he welcomes his martyrdom as an achievement of following Christ.

Polycarp of Smyrna, martyred in 155, featured in a record of his martyrdom likely contemporaneous to the period. Defies the accusations of the pagans.

Justin Martyr, died 165, differs from his predecessors: instead of rejecting the language of Philosophy, he uses its terms and concepts to defend and explain the faith.

Irenaeus, writes “Against Heresies” in 190, appeals to wider witness of the faith and scriptures (of the whole = catholic) in contrast to the “secret knowledge” of the Gnostics.

A picture emerges of communities passionate in their devotion to Jesus, expectant of his return, free to disregard their persecution, living in relationships considerably different from the pagan system around them. Early on, the oversight of bishops and presbyters was important to the faith, unity and leadership of the church. Early on, Christians learned the message from the texts of the New Testament, using them in worship, and celebrating the Eucharist together on Sundays.

Development of the Canon:

- See dates
- Letters above use NT literature heavily, describe the catholic views
- Evidence shows broad acceptance of the core of the NT by early 100s; other writings use NT texts as an appeal to accepted authority.
- Early writers include lists of books, most of which are the core of the NT
- Appealed to as having distinctive authority vs. other writings in late 2nd century
 - (Irenaeus and others)
- Irenaeus lists 21 of 27 NT books; Origen in early 200s had the full 27;
- By late 200s, the choice of authoritative scriptures is treated without much controversy, though there is some variation on the use of a few texts in parts of the empire.
- Council of Nicaea in 325: though Jerome later mentions a discussion about Judith from the council, little else suggests a discussion occurring about the formation of the canon. There seems to have been no pressure for any official act to define a canon.
- The 27 books are treated as settled and without controversy by late 300s.
- Athanasius describes the full 27 books as “canon” in a letter in 367.
- Later disputes in the Protestant Reformation prompted declarations of which books were included (the issues were of OT books sometimes called “the Apocrypha”).

Note that the “Gnostic” texts (including “the Gospel of Judas,” etc) appear long after the core of the NT was well known and used as authority. They appear in the mid-100s as a considerable theological anomaly. Irenaeus cites the NT Gospels as well known and long established and in considerable contrast to the Gnostic message. Gnosticism taught, for instance, that Jesus was not really human, that there is a bad god of the Old Testament and material world, and a good god who enlightens us to higher levels of spirituality to escape the material world through gaining more of the “secret knowledge” (= “gnosis”).

The process of forming the New Testament was neither one of sitting down and writing a book (neither by the apostles, nor by fourth century bishops), nor was it one of councils making a book by auditioning a wide variety of texts, including gnostic texts. Rather, the *message* was authoritative early on, and its transmission was aided by texts that were shared early on and gained natural recognition around the church, most of them by ~100, and most of the rest by the late 200s.

This recognition developed more easily when a text had apostolic origin, and wide acceptance: **what was apostolic and “catholic.”** Catholic means “of the whole,” that is, of the whole church in contrast to idiosyncratic and secretive teachings and texts that appeared later. A few writings, such as Clement’s letter, and the Shepherd of Hermas, were used in many churches, but without apostolic origin and wide acceptance, they were not included in the canon. They were still in line with NT teaching and still revered, but not on the same level as the canon of the NT.