

The Inspiration of the Bible.

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The first Christians relied on the Old Testament as their chief religious book. To them it was of divine origin and authority. The New Testament writings came into gradual use by the side of the older Jewish documents, according to the times in which they appeared; and the reputed names of the authors. When Marcion came from Pontus to Rome—A. D. 144—he brought with him a scriptural collection, consisting of the Pauline epistles—those addressed to Timothy and Titus, with the epistle to the Hebrews, were not in this collection.

In the latter part of the first century, and through the whole of the second, heresies were common and disputes abounded. Only a partial list of the books of the New Testament existed in the beginning of the second century. In the latter part of A. D. 200 there seems to have been a full list of the New Testament writings. By this time the idea was entertained and some progress made, in uniting all the local churches in one to be called the Catholic Church. The Christians converted from among the Jews, "had their favourite gospels and Acts." The gospel of Matthew was highly prized by them. It existed in various revisions. The Revelation of John and the preaching of Peter were also high in their esteem. The Clementine Homilies—A. D. 180—used the four gospels. They had other writings no longer considered inspired. The Christians, who were Jewish converts, were too much filled with bigotry and prejudice to make a sound and impartial collection of the sacred scriptures, even in the second century. Their great reverence for the law and the prophets obscured their spiritual vision. The Christians gathered from among the Gentiles made better progress in casting out the apocryphal writings, and in gathering those unquestionably inspired into one, as the books of the New Testament. Even here the Jewish Christians gave trouble and retarded progress. After Paul's epistle had circulated among the churches, they would naturally be copied and united in one collection. "As also in all his epistles," says Peter, "speaking in them of those things in which are some things hard to be understood—implies a collection of the epistles of the apostle.

"One hundred and seventy years elapsed from the coming of Christ, before the collection assumed a form, that carried with it the idea of holy and inspired. The way in which it was done was by the apostolic writings being raised higher and higher, until they were considered of equal authority with the Old Testament. In this way the churches came to have authoritative scriptures to which they could appeal with confidence.

Until the middle of the second century, the words, sayings and messages of Christ and His apostles, served the purpose of written authority. They came from so many sources, and were in such agreement that, as tradition, they were authoritative. But when they began to be confused and contradictory, then written statements became necessary to the unity of the faith. To the Thessalonians Paul said: "Brethren, stand fast and hold the tradition which you have been taught, whether by word or our epistle."

In the second half of the second century there was a canon of the New Testament consisting of two parts, called the "gospel" and the "apostle." The first was complete containing the four gospels alone; the second, which was incomplete, contained the Acts of the Apostles and epistles, i. e. thirteen of Paul, one of Peter, one of John, and the Revelation. Where this collection originated is uncertain. Its birthplace may have been Asia Minor, Alexandria or Western Africa. At all events, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian speak of its two parts; and the three agree in recognizing its existence.

The example and influence of the churches, to which the writings had been first addressed, must have done much in the matter of the reception of the books.

It evidently became necessary, to meet the various heresies with written language, and not traditions, passed on from mouth to mouth to have inspired and accepted records to which to refer in settling disputes and in teaching infallible doctrines. This course became essential if common ground would be maintained on which those holding the truth could stand and defend the churches from current speculations and errors. The union of believers also made the acceptance of authoritative scripture necessary. Even Paul marvelled that some Christians were so soon drawn away from the faith of the gospel. Other gospels were preached in his day.

Up to this time, each church was an isolated, independent body. The episcopal system of uniting the churches into one organization had not as yet been established. Much less was Romanism, with an infallible head at Rome, even thought of at this time. It took many years to evolve this masterly system of ecclesiasticism. There was an imperative demand for a list of New Testament writings, like those of the Old Testament, for more purposes than one. The doctrines of the Gnostics and Manichaeans were abroad and were defeated by Greek and Persian philosophy. These teachings proved very hurtful to Christianity. As, in our day, the higher criticism, or rather destructive

criticism, supplants spirituality by rationalism, so it was in that day. Of the Gnostics this was especially true. Paul came in contact with this system in its early stages. To the Christians, he said, "I came not to you in the wisdom of men." His speech and his preaching were not in man's but in God's wisdom. This, too, was a time when apocryphal books multiplied to an alarming extent; and threatened to overwhelm and discredit the inspired writings.

To all churches, however, united in one, we are not indebted for collecting the inspired writings of the New Testament. It was after the middle of the second century before such an organization existed. A little common sense, added to spiritual discernment, helps us to a satisfactory answer to the question, who first gathered the New Testament writings into a collection, and pronounced them holy and inspired? As we learn from their contents, they were first written and sent to the several congregations or churches to which they were addressed. The writers expressed the wish that their writings should be circulated among churches, other than the ones to which they were directly sent. The pastors of these churches would naturally feel that they were the custodians of these sacred writings. To copy them was as natural as it was essential. I now have in my possession a thick volume of copies of letters written by the fathers of the Baptist denomination in the Maritime Provinces, and copied by a Mr. Bennett, grandfather of the Misses Bennett of Windsor. This collection includes some letters of Henry Alline, a few of which I copied into the Baptist history. Had it not been for these copies, not a letter of that fervent evangelist could now be found, although it is probable he wrote hundreds of them. When printing was unknown, and copying a profession, it follows that the separate writings of the New Testament would be extensively multiplied by copying. The pastors of the churches, in this way, would come to have a complete set of apostolic writings. The original independence and consequent responsibility of the churches, were not seriously disturbed until after the middle of the second century. The churches were then related to each other as are the Baptist churches of today. The books being in the hands of the ministers, would come to be the sacred possession of each church. The way was thus prepared for a council of all the churches to consider and pass upon the sacred canon of the New Testament. Each pastor would carry to the council the views of his church in the matter of writings, believed by them to be inspired. A few at least of the principal pastors in different countries before the end of the second century, seemed to have come to a decision in regard to the canonical books of the New Testament. Before any general council took the matter of the authenticity and inspiration of the Scriptures into consideration, tradition had been doing its work in confusing the inspired with the uninspired books.

Apostolic piety had largely fallen into decay, and this created conditions favorable to error and imposture. There were men, however, who strove to free the apostolic writings and apostolic truth from the ever increasing accumulations of apocryphal productions immediately following the times of the apostles. In the martyrdom of Polycarp (martyr 167 A. D.) an epistle believed to have been written about A. D. 160, there is mention of a general church—"Catholic Church." The thought of such an organization is also in the Ignatian epistles (Ignatius martyr 116 A. D. But the established use of the term is due to Irenaeus (died 202 A. D.), Tertullian (died about 220 A. D.) and Cyprian (martyr 258 A. D.). Origen was also an eminent author. He made a critical examination of the books of the New Testament. Before his time, the leading books had been regarded as sacred and the final and infallible appeal in matter of belief and practice in the Christian churches. He did not oppose this practice; but assumed that it was true and safe. The tradition of the churches in respect to the inspired books are regarded by him as trustworthy and justifiable. The number of sacred and inspired books increased. They were, through a critical process, taken from the apocryphal writings, which claimed a place among them. There was in the age much conflict of opinion in regard to the genuine and inspired books. As yet no council had given a decision in regard to them.

But some in the churches continued to retain apostolic light—primitive piety; and so far as this was true, there was that spiritual consciousness of which I shall speak at length in a future number, which prevailed in the churches of the East and West, and which did much to settle the question of an inspired canon of the New Testament. The result was unanimity almost universal. The final outcome was the list of writings which have stood the critical examination of all the subsequent centuries. The New Testament, as we now have it, which came into existence as a collection of inspired writings in the last of the second and the first of the third centuries, has withstood the fires in which it has been tried, and in which it is still undergoing trial; and doubtless will remain God's word of the New Covenant until the end of time.

There is no definite catalogue of the books of the New Testament reaching back to the days of the apostles. Inspired and uninspired sacred literature was produced contemporaneously and, to use a modern scientific term, there was a survival of the fittest. The genuine was separated from the spurious by spiritual election. The wheat was

separated from the chaff by winnowing, sometimes violent winnowing. So far as the Old Testament is concerned, a list was in existence in the time of Christ. It had been prepared and preserved by the Jews. This was not the case with the New Testament. Among the early Christian writers none, except Jerome and Origen, seemed to have understood the Hebrew language. The Old Testament canon, formed in Alexandria by the Alexandrian Jews, contained some apocryphal books. In some of the Christian writers these books are referred to as if they were a part of the Old Testament. However, this is not general. Origen, Jerome and Epiphanius refer to the use of the Old Testament apocryphal books in some of the churches. Jerome says that the Nicene Council (325) admitted Judith as a canonical book. At councils where the inspiration of the Scriptures was discussed, the examination was not carried on by the critical method; but by the previous decision of the churches—the authority of tradition which rested on spiritual insight and judgment. Before the matter of deciding the canon of both the Old and the New Testaments got into the hands of councils as it did in the fourth and fifth centuries, the matter had been substantially decided and remained so until the Council of Trent, held in Luther's day. At this assembly the books of Tobit, Judith, the Book of Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch and first and second Maccabees were added to the Old Testament by the decree of the Council of Trent. The New Testament as now accepted was pronounced canonical. "Whoever shall not receive, as sacred and canonical, all these books and every part of them, as they are commonly read in the Catholic church, and are contained in the old vulgate Latin edition, or shall knowingly or deliberately despise the aforesaid traditions, let him be accursed." Thus said the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in the 16th century. This was practically the decision arrived at in the fourth and fifth centuries. It was sustained by general usage. The Greek and Roman Catholic churches took the Latin Vulgate, as translated by Jerome, as their canon of inspired scriptures.

Luther, having been trained in the Roman Catholic church, was, on the occasion of his breaking with that communion, unsettled in his belief about many church dogmas and among them that of the canon of scripture. This matter he had to settle for himself. James seemed to be opposed to his cardinal doctrine of salvation by faith. He therefore said it was an epistle of straw. He did not put the Epistle of Hebrews on an equality with those of Paul. He did not consider the revelation as apostolic or prophetic. He, however, reversed this judgment. He had doubts about the epistle of Jude. Other reformers held various opinions about the canonicity of the books of the Bible. A number of the Reformed churches and among them the Church of England, allowed the reading of some of the apocryphal books of the Old Testament, while they did not regard them as inspired. The Confession of Faith at Westminster sharply distinguishes between the canonical and apocryphal books both of the Old and the New Testaments.

Spreading Literature.

IV.

Doctor Cramp used to say "Christianity is the heaven of the world, and Baptists are the heaven of Christianity." Probably this refers to Baptist principles. True democracy prevails in our churches, and independent thinking among our members. Our churches are proverbial for not being under the thumb of pastor or rich or influential member. There may be some exceptions; but we are more free from the "one man power" than any other denomination. I have heard of churches which had not a member brave enough to oppose a measure proposed by the clergyman or by the deacons, and while deploring such "slavery" I was glad they were not Baptist churches. The "Terrors of the Church" do not scare us; and "Don't oppose the Lord's anointed servant" dare not be quoted in any Baptist meeting no matter how small the church or lowly and unlearned the members. The pastor shallow enough to use such argument in order to get his plans adopted would have to resign, and every lover of freedom must be glad we reside on such elevated ground. But all the "priestcraft" so called is not entirely outside the Baptist churches made up as they are of individuals born and bred among people many of whom would not dare to oppose the clergyman no matter how much his own judgment might differ. Now, this matter of individual opinion (within the limits of reason) is exceedingly important for the human race. Break the shackles of old forms and ceremonies, and the world is lifted. This is what the Christian missionaries are doing to heathendom. Baptists more, shall I say, than any others are doing this uplifting in America,—yea even in the Maritime Provinces. What an irretrievable loss would fall upon our nation if every Baptist church were obliterated. What blessings would come to humanity if there were twice as many Baptists in the world as there are today! If such were the case, the millennium would seem very near, and how weakened would become despotism, corruption, the trusts, strikes, speculation, speculation and strong drink! Put three or four more living Baptist churches into a city or county, and drunkenness, debauch-