

THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT:  
THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF ITS SELECTION

A. The New Testament: Written Holy Tradition

1. The Life of the Church: the Holy Tradition

a) the term tradition comes from the Greek word paradosis which means:

- to pass down
- to transmit

b) the Holy Tradition is "the passing down of Godly Life"

- the godly life of the Holy Trinity was passed down to Adam and Eve as they were created in "God's image and likeness"
- Adam and Eve replaced the godly tradition of life with the worldly tradition of life, when they transgressed God's commandment and broke unity with Him, the source of Godly life
- the New Adam, Jesus Christ is the incarnate Godly life; united with Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, man can experience the Godly life, or the Holy Tradition, again
- the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, the New Man with Godly life; the very life of the Church is the Holy Tradition of life expanding in all those who "live in Christ", beginning with the Apostles and all their successors through time
- the Holy Spirit makes the passing down of Godly life possible; He is the one who:
  1. guides
  2. sustains
  3. defends

The passing down of Godly life, as the Lord promised in:

1. John 14, 26
2. John 15, 26\

- the “mechanism of passing down Godly life is the imitation in discipleship, which means:
    1. the Apostles imitated the life of the Lord
    2. the successors of the Apostles imitated the life of the Lord in the Christ-like life of the Apostles, etc. (apostle means sent)
- c) the Holy Spirit INSPIRED ORAL TRADITION

- nothing was written until A.D. 50 (maybe A.D. 44)
  1. the Lord Jesus did not write anything
  2. all the Apostles preached
    - a. How many recorded?
- The Church grew and was effective even though there was no written New Testament
- Acts 11,26 tells us that Paul taught for one year yet we have no record of what he said
- The Bible points out that preaching was by mouth only at first, as we can see from:

+ Romans 10,17  
 + 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 2,13  
 + 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 2,2  
 + 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 1, 3  
 + 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3,10  
 + Titus 1,9

- d) the Holy Spirit inspired the writings
- people of the Church were inspired to write for the Church and her people, as we can see in:
    1. 2 Peter 1,21
    2. John 20, 31 (you is plural)
    3. Romans 15, 4
  - the books of the New Testament were:
    1. written gradually
    2. based on specific needs and questions raised by those to whom they were written
    3. not intended to finish the subject
    4. as we can see if 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7,1

- the oral teaching continued, as we can see from:
  1. 2<sup>nd</sup> John 12
  2. John 21 , 24-25 and 20, 30-31 (96 AD)
  3. even though the Gospels were designed to record the Lord's sayings and deeds, there were things He said which the Evangelists did not record, as we can see in Acts 20, 35

## 2. The Holy Tradition and the tradition of men

### a) The Bible condemns the traditions of men

- Mark 7,8 condemns:
  - + “traditions” introduced by the Pharisees and elders, which were given the same authority of the law
- Colossians 2,8 condemns:
  - + pagan philosophical “traditions” used by the Gnostic heretics and claiming to have the same authority as the Lord's teaching

### b) The Bible urges the keeping of Holy Tradition

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 2, 15
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 3, 6
- 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11, 2

## 3. The Church selects the books of the New Testament based on the criteria of Holy Tradition

### a) no complete listings during the first 300 years

- the first listing was put together by Marcion (who was anti Semitic) who:
  - + rejected the Jewish heritage
  - + kept only an edited copy of Luke

+ kept 10 of Paul's epistles (out of 11 books)

- the local churches often used some of the books which were available to them
- there were many “gospels” besides the four which are included in the New Testament, such as:
  - + the Gospel according to Hebrews
  - + the Gospel according to the Egyptians
  - + the Gospel according to Peter
  - + and others
  - + this reality is evident in Luke 1,1, where he writes that “many have taken a hand to set in order a narrative...”
- other books were considered to be of Apostolic origin, such as:
  - + the first Epistle of Clement (authentic)
  - + the epistle of Barnabas
  - + the Preaching of Peter
  - + the Revelation of Peter
  - + the Didache
  - + the Protevangelium of James
  - + the Acts of John
  - + the Acts of Paul
  - + the Shepherd of Hermas
- some of the present New Testament books were not accepted initially by some parts of the church, such as:
  - + the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Western part of the church
  - + the book of Revelation in the Eastern part of the church
- the Church decided in councils the final canon of the New Testament:

+ the council of LAODICEA met in A. D. 363 and listed the canonical books of the Old and New Testament, with the exception of the book of Revelation

+ the third council of CARTHAGE met in A.D. 397 and listed the 27 books as we have them today; it also insisted that only these 27 books were to be read in the Church services and no others.