

## Church History 101

### Lesson 6

### The Power of Story

**Key Concepts:** One of the things that separated Judaism and later Christianity from all other religions of the First Century was that they were religions of the book. This means that they had scriptures which not only recounted their history but were determinative for their cultic practices and ethics.

**Story:** At its outset Christianity was guided by what we now refer to as the Old Testament. This consisted of the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy), the Writings and the Prophets. This makes sense, since as we noted in an earlier article, the Jesus' movement was initially based within Judaism. The earliest Christians continued to worship at the Temple and follow Jewish holiness practices. What is fascinating though is that the church moved fairly quickly to adopt additional writings which would become the basis for all that the church believes and does.

The earliest writings were those of the Apostle Paul. Paul, as we noted in an earlier article, was a well-educated Jew, who was knowledgeable of Jewish scripture as well as Greek philosophy and ethics. Once he became a follower of Jesus the Christ, he embarked on a mission of planting and supporting churches. Along the way, Paul wrote letters to both churches and individuals. These letters almost always addressed particular issues and situations faced by churches as well as questions asked by those with whom he corresponded.

Paul's letter writing career lasted from approximately 50 CE to 60 CE. He is credited with writing 13 of the 27 New Testament books, though scholars can only agree on seven and wonder about the other six. Paul's central message was that Jesus was the Son of God who came into the world to die on the cross in order to break the power of sin and death, thus allowing for the creation of a world-wide people of God which welcomes all who have faith in Jesus.

The second set of writings were the Gospels (which means Good News, referring to what God did in and through Jesus). The Gospels consist (in order of appearance) Mark (c. 69 CE), Matthew (c. 70-80 CE), Luke (c. 80 CE) and then John (c. 90-100 CE). These books consist of Jesus' stories that were gathered from a variety of sources and carefully edited in order to tell the Jesus event from a particular point of view. The first three (Matthew, Mark and Luke) share enough material that they are known as the Synoptic (meaning similar) Gospels. Mark is the common basis for the other two. John is in many ways completely different. It shares virtually none of the stories in the other Gospels and has a different timetable for Jesus' life. What these stories share in common though is Jesus as messiah, who lives, dies and is raised from the dead.

The third set of writings are an amalgamation of letters from other people (Peter and James) as well as the Letter to the Hebrews and those attributed to John (1,2,3 John and Revelation). These books were slowly gathered into collections which varied by region. It was not until 397 CE that the western church decided on a final list.

Just as the Old Testament was authoritative for the Jewish community, the Gospels and letters soon became authoritative for the church. Unlike Roman "religion" that focused solely on cultic activities (offering sacrifices) the Christian community allowed these new writings to orient its worship, ethics and world-view. They were also central to its ongoing discussions about the nature of Jesus and Jesus' relationship to God and to the Spirit.

#### Questions:

1. How would you describe the Bible to someone who asked?
2. How authoritative are the scriptures for how you live your life?
3. What are your favorite Jesus' stories?