

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
LENT 2004
NEW TESTAMENT BASICS I

THE BIRTH OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introductory Comments

I have called this series *New Testament Basics* to indicate that my aim is simple – to try to convey basic information about the New Testament. So, I hope, nothing too fancy or elaborate! But I am only doing this because of a prior conviction that it is important for every believer to know their way around the New Testament, to know what's there, have some idea of why it's there and so to feel more confident in reading it and finding in it nourishment for the life of faith. I don't mean that you have to be an expert or to know vast amounts of detail or historical background, but to have a general sense of what it's all about. This is important because these are the *special* writings of the Christian church – not, of course, the only writings produced by Christians even in New Testament times – but the only Christian writings acknowledged as authoritative for faith and life by all Christians, and that from a pretty early date and still today. I take that place of the New Testament for granted but I don't intend to go into the story of *how* they gained that place – it is, in fact, a very complicated story and not easy to convey clearly, just because scholars are not entirely clear about it themselves. Suffice it to say that by 200AD, bar a bit of shouting, the church recognized as its very own special writings, or scriptures, and as the authoritative source of its teaching, its fundamental reference point you might say, what we would recognize as the New Testament. (It also, of course, accepted the Jewish scriptures – roughly the Old Testament and most of the Apocrypha, but that is not the focus of our attention this Lent). The fact is that anything we could

recognize as Christianity is inconceivable without the New Testament, without this collection of 27 distinct writings, comprising of 4 gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, 21 letters (or epistles) and the apocalypse (Revelation).

The Birth of the New Testament

Let me tell *you* a story told to *me* by the late George Hunter, a parish minister of the Church of Scotland. George went into a bookshop in Glasgow and asked for a copy of the New Testament in Greek. After a while the assistant returned to say that she was terribly sorry, but the New Testament had not been translated into that particular language! She couldn't help him. It is, of course, a basic fact about the NT that it is written in Greek. Two ladies I overheard at a bus stop in Oxford complaining that at Evensong the words of the Authorized King James Version, which were good enough for St Paul, had been abandoned in favour of a modern version, did not appear to be acquainted with this basic fact, which was a pity, because that fact tells us at least two important things about the NT.

First, since it is almost certain that Jesus and his first disciples neither knew nor spoke Greek, this reminds us that, as far as the gospels are concerned, we are dealing with a period of time during which people passed on what they knew of Jesus and his words and deeds by word of mouth and then another period of time in which this material was translated from the Aramaic of his and their speech into Greek and written down. Second, the Acts, the letters and the apocalypse were from the first written in Greek and so, although the writings of a still very small, new religious community with Jewish roots, represent the expansion of that community into the wider, non-Jewish world. That the NT is from the first written in the dominant language of world culture and not, say, in Hebrew, the original language of the OT, suggests the “newness” of Christianity and how quickly it moved

beyond its origins. (As it happens it also shows just how that “newness” emerged out of Judaism, for the Greek of the NT is in many ways close to the Greek of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT done at Alexandria in the 200s BC). It also meant, in time, that its writings could become immediately accessible to readers and writers of Greek and so be no longer the sole property of the community or communities which produced them.

The community or communities which produced them. It is important to realize that life in Christ (the church) precedes the texts of the NT (though not those of the OT, of course). In other words, the NT was not the basis of faith, but rather the gathering expression of faith. Behind it and coming through it was a whole series of Christian communities, from Palestine, through Asia Minor and Greece to Italy and Rome itself, which had themselves sprung up in response to the preaching of the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. To begin with the scriptures of these Christians were those of the Jews – what we now call the OT. The specifically Christian scriptures arose out of the developing life and needs of those early communities – so there was a period, not all that long, but nonetheless significant, when Christianity was, in fact, perfectly conceivable without the NT. Of course, as these new texts came to be seen as scripture in their own right on the same level as the OT (a process already at work in the NT writings themselves) they began to exert a normative influence on Christian thought and practice. We cannot, of course, go back to the time when that was not the case, but it certainly remains important to realize that the source and object of faith in Christianity is *not* a collection of writings, however revered, but a living person to whom these writings bear consistent witness – Christ crucified and risen. To that living person there are other witnesses – holy lives, Christian art, worship, the social action of the church, to name but four. The New Testament, fundamental as it is, is not the be all and end all – Christianity is not the

religion of a book, but of communion with the living God as he shows himself in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

The early Christian communities produced various writers who created the texts out of the encounters and needs of their churches. I can only give a flavour of these encounters and needs in this short talk. The fundamental starting point was the resurrection of Jesus and the empowerment of the disciples by the Spirit. This opened in their experience a new way to God and, as day follows night, a new engagement with the scriptures, a new encounter with familiar texts. If you look at a Greek text of the NT you will learn that one of the conventions is to print quotations from the OT in bold type – there is quite a lot of bold type all over the NT! Indeed some of the NT writings came out of the need to show that the scriptures pointed to Christ, that he is the fulfilment of all God's promises to his people and so the way to God. It is not hard to see that much of this work must have been necessitated by living and preaching among the Jews in the synagogues and countless other encounters, many of them increasingly hostile – the Gospel of St Matthew, the Acts of the Apostles and many of Paul's letters give us glimpses of just that. God has done a new thing by raising Jesus from the dead and sending the Spirit on his followers, but it is the same God who gave the Law to Moses, who is spoken of in the scriptures – so *they* must point to this new thing. So, from the first, the church appropriated the OT scriptures and never abandoned them, though a littler later a Christian theologian called Marcion tried to get the church to do just that.

But the new way soon struck out beyond the Jewish world. The new communities, many of them composed mainly of non-Jewish people, had new needs, new problems. Should Christians remain married to their pagan spouses; should they marry at all in view of the impending end of the world; should they eat meat left over from sacrifices at pagan altars; should they go to law in pagan

courts; just what should be required of gentile converts in relation to traditional Jewish requirements such as circumcision and dietary laws; what were they to make of the fact that Jesus did not return as they expected; what was required of them in relation to the Roman authorities, especially the emperor as the church settled down to a longer term existence in the wider society; how should they behave under persecution; how could they distinguish between teaching that was true to Jesus and teaching that was not; who had authority in the community and what sorts of discipline were required? These sorts of issues we find addressed in Acts and in the epistles, among many others. How should Jesus be presented to a gentile rather than a Jewish audience – Luke’s gospel and the Acts are certainly concerned with this. Then there needed to be reliable sources of Christ’s words and deeds for purposes of teaching and preaching, summaries of basic belief for new adherents, words and hymns for worship – these sorts of materials are preserved in the gospels and epistles. And then, as the first generation of apostles and disciples died out they clearly had need of reliable, written records of the story of Jesus, his words and deeds – hence the creation of the gospels, themselves utilizing existing written and perhaps oral materials – the passion story, collections of parables, collections of sayings of Jesus, birth stories, traditions of resurrection appearances.

Out of these kinds of needs and encounters arose four different types of literature – gospels, church history, letters and apocalyptic – and within each type there are many other forms of writing too. In other words, we have an extraordinarily varied and exciting body of material. Something for everyone, really. It is one of the most wonderful things about Christianity, that its foundational writings are so varied and endlessly fruitful.

Finally, a few words about time-scale. While some of the earliest material in the NT is to be found embedded in the gospels, the

gospels themselves, as completed works, are not the earliest writings. All of Paul's epistles, for example, are thought to predate the earliest gospel, St Mark. If you were to list the books of the NT in what most people agree to be the order of their composition, the gospels would be between the middle and end of the list, John's Gospel very near the end. I think it is safe to say, however, that by 100AD, all of the books with which we are familiar had been written. It is, in fact, an explosive phenomenon, the NT, forged in the explosive emergence of the Christian churches after the resurrection – it all happened very quickly indeed.

Next week we will begin our exploration of these different kinds of writings by taking a closer look at the gospels and the acts of the apostles.