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THE COUNCIL OF NICE AND THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE.

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A portion of the skeptical class of the community are intelligent and somewhat candid, but unfortunately are not familiar with the subjects about which they talk, and hence are led into most egregious errors.

There is, perhaps, no statement more current among infidels at large, whether of high or low degree, than that the canon of New Testament Scripture was defined and settled by a vote of the bishops assembled at the Council of Nice, in the year A.D. 325. Over and over has this assertion been made and reiterated. And many infidels have settled it as one of the articles of their faith, and upon this basis proceed to deride Christians for their folly and superstition.

I recollect meeting this story in Marlboro', Mass., where it had been written out by a leading infidel, and printed in a newspaper. The writer declared that this account of the origin of the New Testament rested upon the authority of Papias, an early Christian bishop. I replied that there was one little difficulty about that story, namely, that Papias had been dead and buried 150 years or more before the Council of Nice was ever heard of; but suggested that, as they might have obtained their information from "the spirits," the fact of his death was no insuperable difficulty in the way of their theory. The skeptic arose to explain, and said the person alluded to was not the right Papias, but that the one he referred to was an "obscure Christian bishop of the fourth century." The writer replied that he was no doubt very "obscure," so obscure that no one had ever heard of him before or since.

It seemed desirable, however, that this statement about Papias should be looked up, and so, turning to a well-known infidel book written by an English author, and published at the office of what has long been the leading infidel paper of America, these words were found:

"The following fact, mentioned by Pappius in his 'Synodicum of the Council of Nice,' is however, worth all the preceding, valuable and curious though they be. Pappius informs us of the manner in which the true Gospels were selected from the false at that memorable council: 'This was done,' says he, 'by placing all the books under a communion table, and upon the prayers of the council, the inspired books jumped upon the table! while the false ones remained under!' What a test of truth! What a proof of inspiration! It is quite a stirring argument. Who, after this, will venture to doubt the authenticity of the Scriptures?.... And if these councils are not to be depended upon, we have no means of ascertaining which of the immense numbers of Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelations, are really genuine, or if any are so. All is confusion, doubt, and uncertainty. A curious state of things when a book is said to be of divine origin."

Similar statements are found in numerous infidel publications, and are received with unquestioning confidence by infidels who taunt Christians with their credulity in believing the Bible. This story, as quoted above, was referred to as "an historical record translated from the Greek," in an article published in a Boston infidel paper.

Briefly stated, the Council of Nice did nothing of the kind during its sessions, as this question did not come up for consideration there. This foolish story occurs in a book entitled "Synodikon," which was printed from an old Greek manuscript, first discovered by John Pappus, a German theologian, but written no one

knows when, where, or by whom; but as it refers to events which occurred in the year A.D. 869, we know it must have been written at least 544 years after the Council of Nice was held. Pappus probably discovered this romancing old document in some library, and printed it as a curiosity; and infidels have swallowed it whole, as if it were the authentic history of an eye-witness.

We propose now to show briefly, the absurdity and falsity of the assertion that the New Testament was concocted by a pack of priests, or an ecclesiastical council.

Robert Phillip's "Life, Times, and Missionary Enterprises of John Campbell," the African Missionary traveler, contains (pp. 215-216) the following anecdote by Mr. Campbell:

I remember distinctly an interesting anecdote referring to the late Sir David Dalrymple, better known to literary men abroad by his title of Lord Hailes, a Scottish judge. I had it from the late Rev. W. Buchanan, one of the ministers of Edinburgh. I took such interest in it that, though it must be about fifty years ago since he told it, I think I can almost relate it in Mr. Buchanan's words:

"I was dining sometime ago with a literary party at old Mr. Abercrombie's, father of General Abercrombie who was slain in Egypt at the head of the British army, and spending the evening together. A gentleman present put a question which puzzled the whole company. It was this: 'Supposing all the New Testaments in the world had been destroyed at the end of the third century, could their contents have been recovered from the writings of the first three centuries?'

"The question was novel to all, and no one even hazarded a guess in answer to the inquiry. About two months after this meeting, I received a note from Lord Hailes, inviting me to breakfast with him next morning. He had been one of the party. During breakfast

he asked me if I recollected the curious question about the possibility of recovering the contents of the New Testament from the writings of the first three centuries.

"I remember it well,' said I, 'and have thought of it often, without being able to form any opinion of conjecture on the subject.'

"Well,' said Lord Hailes, 'that question quite accorded with the turn or taste of my antiquarian mind. On returning home, as I knew I had all the writings of those centuries, I began immediately to collect them, that I might set to work on the arduous task as soon as possible.' Pointing to a table covered with papers, he said, 'There have I been busy for these two months, searching for chapters, half-chapters, and sentences of the New Testament, and have marked down what I have found, and where I found it, so that any person may examine and see for himself. I have actually discovered the whole New Testament from those writings, except seven (or eleven) verses, (I forgot which,) which satisfied me that I could discover them also. 'Now,' said he, 'here was a way in which God concealed or hid the treasure of his Word, that Julian, the apostate emperor, and other enemies of Christ who tried to extirpate the gospel from the world, never would have thought of; and though they had, they never could have effected their destruction.'

"The labor of effecting this feat must have been immense; for the gospels and epistles would not be divided into chapters and verses as they are now. Much must have been effected by help of a concordance. And having been judge for many years, a habit of minute investigation must have been formed in his mind."

The Ante-Nicene Library, published by T. & T. Clark, of Edinburgh, comprises some twenty-four octavo volumes, averaging about five hundred pages each. In these 12,000 octavo pages of printed matter, which stand on a shelf by my side as I write, are comprised nearly all the extant writings of some fifteen or twenty of

the most eminent Christian authors who lived before the year A.D. 325, when the Council of Nice was convened. One of these volumes also contains such remains of those spurious, uncanonical and fictitious Gospels, Acts, etc., as have come down to us from early ages. In these twelve thousand pages, all of which are accessible to skeptics in the English translations, and which can be compared with the originals by those who are [R484 : page 7] competent to do so, will be found an avalanche of evidence upon the question of the origin of the New Testament Scriptures.

These men, some of whom were contemporary with the Apostles, and others who, as their immediate successors, were well acquainted with their associates and contemporaries, give in these writings the most positive and unmistakable evidence as to the New Testament books which they received, and as to the estimation in which those books were held. They quote passage after passage and page after page of the same Scriptures that are quoted to-day and read in every Christian assembly. They quoted the books which we quote; they quoted them as we quote them; they received them as we receive them, and this, long before the Council of Nice or any other council had anything to say about the canon of the Scriptures.

Polycarp, who was martyred A.D. 155 or 156, after having served Christ eighty-six years, and who was, during some thirty years of his long Christian life, contemporary with the Apostle John, whose disciple he was, quotes in his epistle to the Philippians, nearly forty passages from our New Testament; Justin Martyr, who wrote about A.D. 140, or some forty years after the decease of the Apostle John, quotes again and again the very words which we now read in the New Testament; and in the writings of Irenaeus, A.D. 178; Clement A.D. 194; Tertullian, A.D. 200; and Origen, A.D. 230, are to be found 8,728 quotations from the New Testament, including every book which we accept as canonical.*

*TERTULLIAN, in the thirty-sixth chapter of his work, "Against Heretics," written about A.D. 200, when the parchment writings of the apostles, being less than one hundred and fifty years old, should, with ordinary care, have been in perfect preservation, thus speaks concerning the authentic writings of the apostles, then read in the churches: "Come, now, you who would indulge a better curiosity, if you would apply it to the business of your salvation, run over the apostolic churches, in which the very chairs of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places, in which their own authentic writings are read, uttering the voice and representing the face of each of them severally. Achaia is very near you, in which you find Corinth. Since you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi, you have the Thessalonians. Since you are able to cross to Asia, you get Ephesus. Since, moreover, you are close upon Italy, you have Rome, from whence comes, even into our hands, the very authority" [of the apostles].

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Dr. Alexander Keith, in the sixth chapter of his "Demonstration of the Truth of the Christian Religion," records the number of quotations from the New Testament which can be found in works which are still extant, by the writer whom we have named. He reports seven hundred and sixty-seven (767) passages quoted by Irenaeus, from every book in the New Testament except the third epistle of John and the epistle of Jude; three hundred and eighty-nine (389) passages quoted by Clement from every book except the epistle of James and the second and third epistles of John, and the epistle of Jude; eighteen hundred and two (1802) passages, or, if repetitions are included, more than three thousand passages, quoted by Tertullian, from every book in the New Testament except the epistle to James, the third of John, the second of Peter, and the epistle of Jude; while the works of Origen yet extant, contain five

thousand seven hundred and sixty-five (5,765) quotations from the New Testament, including every book contained therein, and excluding all of the so-called apocryphal books, about which infidels sometimes talk so freely. Many works of Origen and other authors of those times have perished, but it is probable that if Origen's entire writings had been preserved, if the New Testament had been lost, it could have been reconstructed from them alone.

These authors which we have named comprise but a portion of the authors who wrote before the Council of Nice; but these are sufficient to settle forever this question of the authenticity of the New Testament Scriptures.

The fact that councils, at a later date, published to the world lists of books which they received as of divine authority, may be important to the council, but is of no importance to the books themselves. A town meeting or a village caucus might publish to the world the volumes they receive as the statutes of the state or the general laws of the nation, but their publication of the fact has no possible connection with the authority of those laws. If they receive them as authoritative, well and good; if they do not receive them, other people do; and the government is abundantly able to enforce them. So this talk about councils and priests concocting the New Testament out of a jumbled-up lot of doubtful and questionable books, is an evidence of that skeptical credulity which is so abundant among infidels as a class.

– The Armory.
