*Fr. Joseph M. Gleason, Sermon at Christ the King Church in Omaha Illinois, 2009*

Imagine that you are a preacher. God himself has called you to be a preacher, and He has put many people under your care.  It is your job to teach them “three Gs” — 1) Who is God? 2) What has God done? 3) What does God require? You only have one week to prepare a top-notch sermon, worthy for presentation to God’s people.  So, you get to work, and you prepare your sermon diligently.

There is only one catch — you are not allowed to use a Bible! You are not even allowed to see any books which quote anything from the Bible. And you do not have any Bible verses memorized.

Now what are you going to do? How are you going to preach to people about God, if you cannot even use the Bible? Is such a thing even possible?

Indeed, the Bible tells us of a man who faithfully performed that very task, on multiple occasions. His name is Noah. In 2 Peter 2:5, he is called a “preacher of righteousness”. Prior to the flood, he preached to people about God’s righteousness. Yet Noah lived many centuries before Moses ever put the Pentateuch together. According to the Bible, Noah preached good sermons *without using the Bible*.

Indeed, this was the normal state of affairs for thousands of years.  God’s people did not have the Bible, yet they faithfully preached.  Enoch lived long before Noah, and Scripture tells us that he taught people about the second coming of Jesus.  Enosh lived even before Enoch, and Scripture tells us that people called upon the Lord’s name in his day.  But how could this be, if no one had a copy of the Bible?

Without a Bible, there could be no Bible studies, no exegetical preaching from the Scriptures, no commentaries on the Bible . . . . So how in the world did God’s people learn to preach, pray, sing, or worship?  Without a Bible, how could it be possible?

But, we might say, “That was just back in the Old Testament.”  God worked in mysterious ways back then.  He allowed all sorts of stuff that seems foreign to us, like monarchy, polygamy, goat sacrifices, and . . . it pains me to even say it . . . *circumcision*!  God also did lots of things that seem strange to us.  If children were persistently rebellious, God required them to be stoned to death.  If a priest’s daughter was sexually immoral, God required her to be burned to death with fire.  God told Isaiah to walk around naked, Ezekiel to cook his food over dung, and Hosea to marry a prostitute.  God turned a shepherd boy into a great King.  God also took a great King, and made him eat grass for seven years, just like a sheep.   Indeed, our God did lots of very strange things during Old Testament times.  So perhaps  this “preaching without a Bible” is just one more of the oddities we can cast into the sea of our own forgetfulness.  God surely does not still behave so strangely, does He?

Let’s fast-forward a couple thousand years.  Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David are all long past, and the glorious days of the Church have begun.  Jesus has died, risen again, and has ascended into heaven.  Pentecost has come, and the Holy Spirit has magnificently filled His people.  Now that we live in the New Testament Church, God would not expect anyone to preach without a New Testament in-hand, would He?  Can you imagine preaching for years, without ever using the New Testament?

Indeed, the early Church literally flourished for *decades* without having any New Testament at all!  For many years, the apostles traveled all over the known world, preaching the Gospel, baptizing new converts and their households, preaching the Gospel, ordaining elders, and planting churches.  They did all of this without having even one book of the New Testament available.  When they preached, they could not refer to the New Testament at all, and when they planted churches, they were not able to give a copy of the New Testament to any of the new converts.  They planted hundreds of churches all over the Roman empire, and left all of them without a single copy of the New Testament.  For years, the apostles were just too busy to write Scripture.  It wasn’t a priority for them.  They figured it was more important to preach the Gospel and plant churches.  For many years, the Holy Spirit figured it was just fine for all the churches to preach and teach, based on the oral teachings they had learned from the apostles, and nothing more.  Many years passed, many churches were planted, and many thousands of converts were won, before any of the apostles finally took the time to sit down and compose the books which we have put together in the collection we now call, “The New Testament”.  It is such a precious book to us now, yet the early Church thrived for decades without it.

Ok, fine.  There were preachers in the Old Testament who had no Bible at all.  But God did lots of strange stuff in the Old Testament.  And yes, we have to admit that the very early Church grew and thrived for many years before the New Testament was even written.  But at least the apostles were still alive back then!  We might suggest that the early Church was deficient in regard to the Scriptures, but that their deficiency was more than compensated by the fact that the apostles were still living.  After all, instead of doing hours and hours of difficult study in Scripture, just think of how much easier it would be to walk right up to the apostles, and ask the hard questions:  *“Peter, should we baptize babies, or not? “  “Paul, how often should we serve communion?”  “James, is it OK for our church to have a female pastor, or do you frown on that?”  “John, I love that book of ‘Revelation’ you wrote, but it just all sounds so funky to me.  So please just shoot straight with me . . . What should I believe about the end-times?  Should I be premillenial, amillenial, or postmillennial?”*

It would be nice to be able to ask the apostles questions, face-to-face!  And in fact, it was probably even easier than that, most of the time.  Without asking an apostle anything, you could simply watch them yourself, to see whether or not they baptize babies.  You could visit several of their churches, and see for yourself whether they ordain women or not.  If you had questions about how often to serve communion, all you had to do was watch.  If you were curious about what sort of music was appropriate in church, you could simply listen for yourself.  If you wanted to see how long a sermon could be, you could pack a sack-lunch (and a sack-dinner!) as you personally listened to Paul preach until midnight.

Indeed, the living apostles were a great gift to the Church.  So perhaps their presence in the first decades of Church history explains why the New Testament was not yet needed.   We may already feel like God worked in strange ways in the Old Testament, and perhaps He worked strangely in the first years of the New Testament Church, as well.  So how far do we have to fast-forward in order to see anything that remotely resembles the state of affairs which we think is normal today?  How far in the future do we have to progress before we can settle down into our comfort zone?

Surely, once the last book of the New Testament was written, and the last apostle died, the Church finally settled down into the “normal” position we see today, right?  Historians tell us that the apostle John was the last apostle to die, and that he died around the end of the first century.  So beginning around the year 100 A.D., God had finally blessed His Church with the completed New Testament, so that they could begin to write commentaries, start Bible studies, hand out copies of the New Testament, do exegesis, and preach regularly from the New Testament.  Right?

Wrong.

It took the early Church nearly *300 years* to fully recognize which books belong in the New Testament.  For the first two generations after the apostle John died, the Church still did not widely agree upon the canonicity of the books of Acts, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John, Jude, and Revelation.  That’s 10 out of the 27 books!  Also, a number of churches believed that the book of *1 Clement* was Scripture, that the *Didache* was Scripture, and that the*Shepherd of Hermas* was Scripture.  Then, for the next couple centuries, the Church studied, prayed, and discussed all these books.  By the end of the 4thcentury, the Church finally agreed upon the canon of the New Testament which we recognize today.

In other words, the early Church grew, thrived, and preached for 300 years, before anyone, anywhere, had a complete copy of “The New Testament” which we recognize today.  For many generations, literally millions of faithful Christians lived and died, having never heard of such a thing.  Back in that day, motel rooms did *not* have a copy of the Gideon’s Bible, with the New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs.  If the Church was a chicken, and the New Testament was an egg, it would not take a rocket scientist to figure out which came first.

But how did the Church survive?  How did Christian men lead their families?  How did preachers perform their duties?  How did they preach for three centuries, without even having access to a complete New Testament?

The answer to this question becomes much clearer if we focus for a moment on a few things which Jesus never did:

1)      Look throughout the entire New Testament, and you will never find Jesus writing any books.

2)      Search everywhere in the New Testament, and you will never find Jesus commanding his disciples to write any books.

3)      Seek all the way through the New Testament, and you will not find Jesus predicting that a book such as “The New Testament” would ever come into existence at all.

Indeed, if the New Testament is silent on any doctrine at all, it is silent regarding the ultimate formation of the New Testament itself!

In the Great Commission, Jesus did not tell his apostles to carry copies of the New Testament into all corners of the earth, because at that time, none of the New Testament had been written yet.  He also did not command his apostles to take a sabbatical so that they could write the New Testament.  Indeed, He didn’t tell them to write anything at all.  Instead, He gave them the following command:

“*Go ye therefore, and****teach****all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:****Teaching****them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*” (Mt. 28:19-20)

In this Great Commission, Jesus uses the word “teach” twice, and the word “baptize” once, but the word “write” is never mentioned.  Indeed, over 20 years later, some of the apostles did write some books to supplement their teaching.  But from beginning to end, their teaching was primarily done orally and liturgically, utilizing both sight and sound.  Instead of preaching from a New Testament epistle, they would simply preach the things which they had learned from Christ.  Instead of writing out detailed instructions for baptism, they would just baptize people.  Instead of composing written liturgies for the Lord’s Supper, they would simply bless bread & wine and give it to faithful Christians at the proper time during the worship service.  Instead of developing curriculum for church-planters, they just planted churches.  Instead of writing articles about teaching, they taught.  Instead of writing books about preaching, they preached.  The apostles walked in the footsteps of Christ, and faithful Christians followed them.  The apostles lived the Christian life, and faithful Christians imitated them.  This is the power of the early Church, which could not be contained in mere books.  Then, just like today, actions created a much greater impression than words.

So, to the church in Thessalonica, the apostle Paul writes:  “*Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.*” (2 Thess. 2:15)  Paul says it doesn’t matter whether a Christian learned something from him verbally, or through his writings.  Either way, Paul’s doctrine was to be followed, because Paul himself was an apostle of Christ.  If Paul planted a church, then that church knew how to celebrate the Eucharist, because they had seen Paul do it, even if they didn’t have a copy of 1 Corinthians.  They knew how to pray, how to preach, and how to introduce people to Christ, even if they didn’t have a copy of Romans.  And they understood the requirements for pastors (priests), even if they didn’t have copies of the pastoral epistles.  Long before they had copies of the New Testament, they faithfully passed down Paul’s teachings, from year to year, and from generation to generation.

The apostle Paul ordained many men to the ministry.  One of Paul’s most famous disciples was a bishop named Timothy.  Near the end of his life, Paul wanted to make sure that the Church would continue in strength after his death, and that the Gospel would continue to be purely preached.  So he gave Timothy instructions regarding the method through which apostolic teaching would be propagated throughout the Church, throughout time:

“*And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.*” (2 Timothy 2:2)

At this point, it is very important that we do not focus on Timothy himself.  Indeed, we would be correct to notice his privileged position, since he was blessed to receive a personal correspondence from the apostle Paul himself!  None of us today can honestly claim to have received a personal note from Paul, so let’s move our thinking past Timothy for a moment.  Instead, let’s think about the other unnamed preachers who are mentioned in this passage.

First, notice that Paul tells Timothy to “commit” Paul’s teachings to “faithful men”.  In other words, Paul is telling Timothy to teach the Truth to other men who will eventually themselves become ministers of the Gospel.  Paul is telling Timothy to train men to become bishops and presbyters (priests).  Now, we are not told the names of all these men.  But for our convenience, let us suppose that after the apostle Paul died, Timothy acquired a student named “Dave”.   Timothy teaches him faithfully, and finally ordains Dave to the ranks of the clergy.  Dave then proceeds to faithfully pastor a church.

But what if you were to ask Dave about his credentials?  What could he tell you?  He had no copy of the New Testament, because a complete copy of that would not exist for another 200 years or more.  He had no seminary degree, because seminaries had not been invented yet.  So you ask him if he had been taught directly by an apostle.  But alas, his answer to your question is “*no*”.   Just like you and me, Dave has never met any of the apostles in-person.   But here is what Dave does say:  He says,  “*I learned the faith from a man who learned the faith from an apostle, and that apostle learned the faith from Christ.*”  And since 2 Timothy 2:2 suggests that these sorts of credentials are acceptable, we would probably do well to agree that Dave’s ordination is indeed valid.  He holds a rightful place of authority within the ministry of the Church, because his consecration was in accordance with apostolic doctrine, and apostolic practice.  Furthermore, many of Dave’s colleagues agree that Dave is a good pastor who teaches apostolic doctrine.  So we have no legitimate reason to question Dave’s authority, and we have no legitimate reason to question Dave’s grasp of doctrine.  Even though the New Testament is centuries away from being fully recognized by the worldwide Church, Dave is still someone who can be trusted to preach the Gospel faithfully, from week to week, every Sunday morning.  His congregation is in good hands.

Dave was not an apostle, nor was he taught by an apostle.  Dave also did not have a complete copy of the New Testament.  Yet he spent decades of his life as a godly preacher, faithfully teaching his congregation the doctrines of the Christian faith.  Indeed, this is impressive.  But we still have not mined the depths of 2 Timothy 2:2.  There is yet another group of people mentioned in this verse.

Paul not only commands Timothy to teach others what he had learned from Paul.  He also commands Timothy to teach people like Dave so well that they “*shall be able to teach others also.*”  In other words, the teaching does not stop after just one generation.  Timothy is supposed to teach Dave to be a teacher.  And then Dave is supposed to repeat the same process.  Just as Paul was a disciple of Jesus, Timothy was a disciple of Paul, and Dave was a disciple of Timothy, now Dave is supposed to train a new generation of ministers who can continue to faithfully preach the Gospel after Dave himself has gone to Heaven.

Let’s suppose Dave trains a man by the name of Jesse.  Suppose Jesse becomes the beloved leader of a thriving, godly congregation, sometime late in the 2nd century.  What are Jesse’s credentials?  Did he learn directly from Jesus?  No.  Did he learn from an apostle?  No.  Did he learn from someone who learned from an apostle?  No.  He has to look back three whole generations to reach an apostle.  Jesse learned from someone who learned from someone who learned from an apostle.  Yet according to 2 Timothy 2:2, there is no reason to question either his authority or his doctrine.  The Church fully recognizes Jesse as a faithful preacher, over 200 years before the Church fully recognizes the New Testament.

But, alas, the devil does not content himself to sit on the sidelines.  From the very beginning, the Church was attacked from within and without by heretics who preached false doctrines, false messiahs, and false gospels.  Among the heretics in the early Church were infamous groups known as the Gnostics, the Donatists, the Sabellians, the Patripassians, the Arians, and a whole host of other names.  They denied everything from the goodness of matter to the deity of Christ.  All of them claimed to be true members of Christ’s Church, and all of them devised clever arguments to lead astray countless thousands of people.  Most of these groups even used quotations from Scripture as support for their heresies.  What was the Church to do, to protect herself from this onslaught?

Just as Jesus and the apostles had commanded, the godly leaders in the Church continued to preach the pure apostolic teachings which they had received.  They met together with each other, and they put together doctrinal statements such as the Apostles’ Creed, which clearly articulated the apostles’ teachings in such a way that heretics could be rooted out.

In the year 325, at the first council of Nicea, a large cross-section of the Church met together in a single location, for the purpose of uprooting the Arian heresy.  The Arians denied the deity of Christ, and they claimed that various Scriptures supported their views.  The true Church knew they were wrong, but *they were unable to present a single text of Scripture which the Arians would disagree with.*  These true Christians recognized the need to articulate the Faith in such a clear way, that the Arians would find it impossible to come into agreement.  So in the year 325, they composed the original version of the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith which is still respected throughout worldwide Christendom today.

Fifty-one years later, in the year 376, Athanasius wrote a letter which included a list of the 27 books in the New Testament canon.  Quickly thereafter, the worldwide Church agreed that the New Testament canon had finally been fully recognized.  Hebrews was Scripture, and *1st Clement* was not.  Revelation was Scripture, and the *Shepherd of Hermas* was not.  Late in the 4th century, the Church finally fully received God’s gift of the New Testament.

Just five years after Athanasius wrote his letter, in the year 381, the Nicene Creed was finally put into its modern form at the 1st council of Constantinople.  And shortly thereafter, in the years 393 and 397, the regional councils of Hippo and Carthage put their stamps of approval on the same New Testament canon which had been promulgated by Athanasius.

It is eye-opening to consider that *the original version of the Nicene Creed was written by the Church over half a century prior to the Church’s full recognition of the New Testament canon*.  The battle over the doctrine of the Trinity, the very core of our Faith, was valiantly fought for many years before the Church even knew which books belonged in her Bible.  *Thus, there is a very real sense in which we can say that the Creeds preceded the Scriptures.*  Before any Christian had to believe in all 27 New Testa­ment books, he had to firmly believe in the Nicene Creed.  This was the litmus test of apostolic faith.

Imagine that you live in the year 330 A.D.  What church would you attend?  What doctrine would you believe?  What would God himself expect you to do?  In agreement with Hebrews 13:17, God would instruct you to “*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account*”.  In agreement with Ephesians 4:11, God would let you know that He has given authority to pastors and teachers, which also suggests that He has given a responsibility to the rest of us to listen to them.  *If God means for them to be teachers, then God means for us to be learners.* In agreement with 2 Timothy 2:2, we would seek out those pastors and teachers who could trace their ordinations back to the apostles themselves.  And in humble submission to these Spirit-filled men of God, we would follow their teachings, and we would therefore submit to their widely-accepted doctrinal statements, such as the Nicene Creed.

Earlier, in reference to 2 Timothy 2:2, we discussed hypothetical preachers named “Dave” and “Jesse”, and we hear the apostle Paul telling us to listen to them, even though they themselves were not apostles.  God commands us to listen to Jesse because he learned from Dave.  God commands us to learn from Dave because he learned from Timothy.  God commands us to listen to Timothy because he learned from Paul.  And God commands us to listen to Paul, because he learned from Jesus.

But it is not necessary for us to merely consider hypothetical men such as Dave and Jesse.  There are other men, real men, who do indeed command our respect.  Today, we still have a book written by Clement, a man who was ordained by the apostle Peter himself.  We also have multiple writings by Ignatius, a man who also was ordained by Peter.   We can read about the martyrdom of Polycarp, a man who was a disciple of the apostle John.  And we can read the writings by Irenaeus, a man who knew Polycarp face-to-face.  These are the men who are referenced in Scripture itself, in 2 Timothy 2:2.  These are the men who learned from the apostles, and who learned from the disciples of the apostles.  These are the Early Church Fathers.  These are men whom God instructs us to obey.  If we do not listen to them, then we violate the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:2, Hebrews 13:7, Ephesians 4:11, and a whole host of other Scriptures.  In other words, *the Bible itself teaches us to heed the voices of the Early Church Fathers.*

For thousands of years before the Old Testament was written, God still empowered men to be preachers.  For hundreds of years before the New Testament was fully recognized, God still empowered men to preach the Gospel.  Indeed, the majority of our heritage is founded upon “Preachers Without Bibles”.

But what does this mean for us today?  Should we just throw our Bibles to the side, and let them collect dust?  God forbid!  Every modern pastor (priest) should be a devoted student of the Bible, and every sermon should be saturated with Scripture.  Our trek through history should not weaken our view of Scripture, but rather should strengthen it.  The Bible was not dropped down to us out of Heaven, written on plates of gold.  Rather, the Holy Spirit wrote the words of God upon the hearts of men in the Church, and it is from those men that we have received our Christian Faith.  Why do we so revere the Bible?  We revere it for the same reason we revere the early Church fathers . . . we revere it because it contains teachings from the apostles, and from the disciples of the apostles.

The Early Church Fathers are not *competitors* with the Bible.  Rather, they are the apostolic teachers through whom God has *given* us the Bible.