

August 28th

Memory verse

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved,
we have a building of God,
an house not made with hands,
eternal in the heavens.

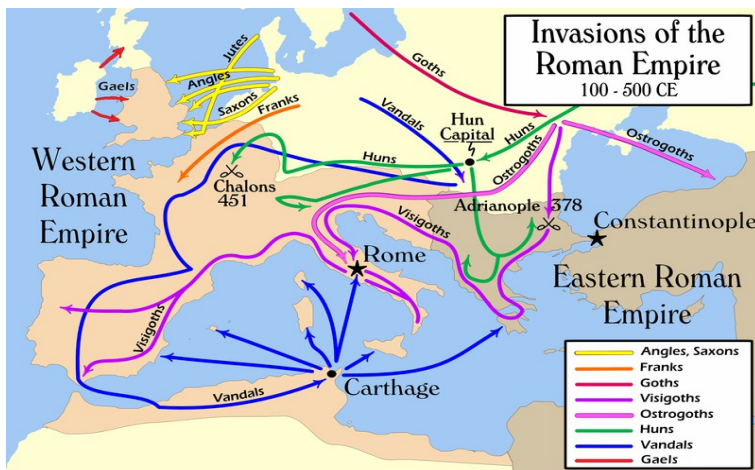
2 Corinthians 5:1

More about today's memory verse in the lesson for 30th August.

Several important things connected with the history of the church in the early middle ages seem to have happened on **28th August**. In 312AD, for instance, the battle of Pons Milvius (the Milvian Bridge) took place. If you did the lesson about Constantine last month¹ you will remember the story and the strange pagan legend attached to Constantine's victory in this battle. The picture shows this ancient bridge over the **Tiber in Rome** as it is today. You could also read about Constantine's city, Constantinople, today in the lesson for May 29th if you have not already done so. An atlas will help you with today's lesson. I have **highlighted** some places for you to look up.



All about books!



On **28th of August** 430AD, under the hot African sun, the Roman city of Hippo (modern name **Annaba**) in North Africa was being besieged by the Vandals. This German tribe was so destructive that even today we still call someone who destroys things without reason a “vandal.” Look at the blue line on the map to see where they came from and where they went. By 435 they had conquered Roman North Africa completely and they went on to rule this part of the world for thirteen years with

Hippo as their capital. North Africa would become the base from which they attacked the very heart of the Roman Empire itself as you can see from the map.²

But on that August day in 430, inside the besieged city, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, lay dying. He knew that his “earthly house of this tabernacle” was about to be dissolved just as our memory verse says. He had been suffering from fever in a city crowded with refugees. The church building in Hippo still stood, in spite of the enemy attack. The thing that was on Augustine's mind, though, was his library. What would happen to all those precious volumes if the Vandals conquered Hippo and

¹ See the lesson for 25th July.

² Image By User:MapMaster - Own work, CC BY-SA 2.5, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1234669>

he was not there to defend them?

It was an important question. Books are very vulnerable in war time. They are very often destroyed either by accident, since they burn so easily, or on purpose as the conquerors seek to wipe everything of cultural significance belonging to the conquered – whose language they often do not even understand. Yet books contain the only detailed records of a civilization. How little we really know today about those long gone peoples whose ruined buildings we can see but whose writings we do not have! Just imagine how much more we would know about the Mayans, for instance, if they had left books and not just the buildings we read about in the lesson as the end of last month.³ No wonder Augustine was concerned. Surely, the Vandals would have no respect for books. He gave orders. The library was to be defended.

Augustine's orders were carried out. After his death a group of his followers, including his biographer Possidius, gathered his writings and all his books together. The invading Vandals spared the cathedral church and the library at Hippo, although I cannot find out exactly why – it certainly does not sound like their normal behaviour does it? The books found their way to Rome – again no one knows how, although some guesses have been made. From here copies made their way to major libraries all over Europe. It is a wonderful thing when books survive to carry the words of one generation to another – and another – and another...



Another later important and not unrelated event that ended on 28th August was the Council of Carthage in 397AD. Again this is an African event. Carthage was a great city in modern-day Tunisia, the ruins of which can still be seen today. You can see some of them in the picture here. You will find Carthage marked on the map on the previous page of this lesson.

You will sometimes hear it said that this council decided which of the books then in circulation among Christians should be included in the official New Testament or New Testament Canon. This is a dangerous and false idea. The Council of Carthage was forced to recognize what God had *already established*: the 27 inspired books that make up the New Testament we have in our Bible today. How do we know this?

To answer this question we must go back and look at what little is known of the life and teachings of a Christian leader, generally regarded as a heretic, called Marcion of Sinope (c.85– c.160).



Marcion may have been some sort of sailor or ship owner but we know so little about him that we are not even sure of this. He travelled from his native Black Sea coast area to Rome where he got into conflict with the church authorities. Many people seem to have agreed with him, however, and so-called Marcionite churches flourished for many years. Early Church leaders such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian called Marcion a heretic or false-teacher, and he was excommunicated (thrown out of the church) by the church of Rome around 144AD. It is only from the writings of these men that we have any record of what Marcion actually taught and believed. They saw to it that his writings were destroyed. Even the so-called *Gospel of Marcion* itself which he is said to have written no longer exists. Scholars claim to have reconstructed it from the quotations from it found in the writings of his enemies but no one

3 See the lesson for 31st July (yet to come).

knows how accurate these quotations are. For all we know they could be grave distortions or exaggerations put out to discredit someone who was threatening the position and power of the church leaders. The picture in the previous page is from the 11th century. It is supposed to show the Apostle John on the left and Marcion on the right. Can you see that Marcion's face looks as if it has been blotted out by someone? It looks as if even at that time any traces of information about Marcion were still being “adjusted”.

Church leaders accused Marcion of teaching that the God of the Old Testament was a different God to the God of the Gospel. They also accused him of saying that Paul was the only true apostle and that Jesus had appeared on earth twice: once to suffer and die and then again to reveal the truth to Paul. It may be true that Marcion taught heretical ideas but so did Justin Martyr who was an enthusiast for pagan philosophy. *He* thought that the pagan philosopher Socrates was a Christian before Christ, although Socrates knew nothing of the Old Testament because, according to Justin, Socrates lived in line with the Divine *logos*! Yet no one excommunicated Justin Martyr. Perhaps Marcion was concerned with the power of the clergy, now separated as a class from the laity (ordinary people). Or was he worried because the emphasis on salvation by faith which we find in the writings of Paul was being replaced by a belief in salvation by baptism? The Bible says we are saved by grace through faith, not by baptism. It is simply not possible to know now because everything that Marcion wrote and taught has been obliterated by those who opposed him. Certainly the idea that Christ appeared to Paul is indeed true!

Many church history books say that the rise of Marcion and his teaching was the spur to the formation by the church of the New Testament canon. Marcion is supposed to have admitted only the letters of Paul and the book of Marcion based on Luke's Gospel to the Canon of Scripture. The church needed to codify what was or was not part of Scripture in order to combat Marcion's canon, they say.

But there is a difference between the Old and New Testaments which is important here. The Old Testament was formed into a canon and preserved by the Tribe of Levi in Old Testament times, by God's express direction. The New Testament teaches that there is now no special priesthood; all believers are priests. Any canon written and preserved by New Testament Christians would be *unofficial* by its very nature. No priestly class or tribe existed to preserve it. Universal acceptance by the body of Christ – Christian believers – and not some church council would be what validated it. Do we have evidence that this is what happened? Yes!

Early Christian writers from the first three centuries AD whose works survive today quote the Bible including the New Testament – just as we have it today – more than 35,000 times. There are 19,368 quotations from the Gospels alone in their works. One hundred years *before* the Council of Carthage, believers had already made the Syrian and Old Latin translations of the New Testament. What the Christians had between AD 100-325 were not the original manuscripts the apostles had written; these wore out with use. But they *had* preserved copies of the originals and it is from these that the early writers were quoting. Early Christians knew exactly what the New Testament was, long before the Council of Carthage!

Something to learn

Did you begin learning the names of all the books that form the Canon of Scripture last month?⁴ If you have given up the task, take heart and have another shot at it starting today. If you are learning them already give yourself a test today. Write down as many of them as you can in two lists, one of the books in the Old Testament and the other of the books in the New Testament. Now check your list with the list you find in the front of your Bible. How many did you manage to remember? I

4 See the lesson for July 9th.

hope you have been practising your “sword drill” too! If not there are full instructions in the lesson for 9th July.

Something to write

If you were able to rescue only three books from your own collection from the Vandals, which would you choose? (You can assume for this exercise that your Bible is already safe so you do not need to include it.) List the three you have selected and then write a few sentences about each, explaining *why* it forms part of your choice.