

## How Do We Decide? Canon and Creed

### Overview

We discovered in Issue 3 that the early church wrestled with many of the same questions that we wrestle with today. In light of the multitude of competing truth claims we encounter every day, how does one decide? What should be the source of our authority and the basis for deciding what is true? Christians rely on the Bible as the primary source, but there are differing points of view on which books should be included in the Bible. Some biblical scholars have even tried to discriminate the true words of Jesus in the New Testament from what they label as propaganda added by the authors of the Bible. And even when we agree on the content of the Bible, we are often miles apart on its meaning. Who is to say one interpretation of a given passage is better than another?

We have already examined two of the major sources the church in the first centuries used to answer such questions—tradition and the authority of church leaders. In this issue, we will focus on the two other pillars—written scripture and early creeds—as well as two specific challenges that faced the early church.

As we study the early church, we will address the following questions:

- What writings should constitute the authoritative “Word of God”?
- How should we respond to subsequent claims of divine revelation, whether written or in other forms?
- Should there be an accepted, standard interpretation of Scripture? If so, what is the value and role of that interpretation today?

## Understanding the Setting

1	50-70	Paul's letters written and circulated
	50-90	Gospels written and circulated
	90-100	Council of Jamnia begins formal canonization of Old Testament
100		
	140	<b>Marcion</b> creates his own list of scripture, excluding parts of Gospels and the Old Testament
	150	Rule of Faith (Apostle's Creed) develops in Rome
	170	<b>Montanus</b> claims to be mouthpiece of God
	170	Roman Christian church responds by drawing up first list of accepted scriptures—the <b>Muratorian canon</b>
200		
	200	General agreement on most books of the New Testament
	201	Tertullian's <i>Against Marcion</i>
300		
	303	Emperor Diocletian persecutes church
	367	Athanasius produces first official list containing all 27 books of the New Testament and no others
	393	Council of Hippo approves Athanasius' list as final and authoritative
	397	<b>Third Council of Carthage</b> formally closes discussion with final list of New Testament canon

## Step 1: Grasp the Issue

### Sound Bites

“We’ll never know what Jesus really said. It’s buried under layers and layers of interpretation by people who wrote to make their point, reflecting their culture and biases.”

“The endeavor to have no creed but the Bible is successful only so long as there is common agreement as to what the Bible teaches.” – John Leith

“The Christian life is based on Scripture and Scripture alone. I don’t need church, teachers, or anyone else to help me understand what God wants of me.”

“How could the early Christians really be Christians if they didn’t have the New Testament to read?”

“Truth can be found in Scripture as interpreted by the teaching of the church.”

“In practice, there has been increased recognition of late that the community of faith and Scripture, the people and the book, coexist with one another, and that attempt to draw sharp lines of distinction between them are somewhat arbitrary. The canon of Scripture may be regarded as growing organically from a community of faith already committed to using and respecting it.” – Alister McGrath

### Case Studies

Samantha has been turned off by church for a long time, and her feet have done the talking—she hasn’t set foot in a church in years. However, she still yearns to have a relationship with God. Recently she started reading the Bible again, and has begun to share her thoughts with you.

“I’ve decided to just read Jesus’ teaching,” she says frankly. “He is so loving, forgiving and wise. I can’t relate to the Old Testament. It’s just a bunch of rules, bizarre prophecies, and stories about a vengeful God who can’t possibly be related to Jesus. Besides, Christians in the early church picked the books that were helpful for them, and I’m just doing the same thing.”

How would you respond to Samantha?

# Canon and Creed

You've finally gotten the nerve to share your faith with your best friend. Recounting the story of your faith, you say, "I found peace from my struggles when I read of Jesus' love for me." Opening your Bible, you begin to show him passages that explain God's plan.

"That's wonderful," he says. "It's great that you have found peace. I find peace when I read a little each day from the Tao. I think many of these ancient writings have timeless truths that can help us in these chaotic times."

"But" you respond, "The Bible is not another set of wisdom writings. It is God's revelation of his activity and will for us. It really is his word."

Quickly your friend tries to calm the waters, "Don't misunderstand me. I think the Bible is wonderful and I sometimes like to read it myself. But you have to admit that it is just a collection of documents that early Christians found helpful. Wasn't there tremendous disagreement about what was sacred and what wasn't? After all, didn't they have to vote on it? I think God's truth comes in many writings."

How do you respond? Is your friend correct about the history of scripture?

"The Book of Mormon is a volume of the holy scripture comparable to the Bible. It is a record of God's dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas and contains, as does the Bible, the fullness of the everlasting Gospel. The book was written by many ancient prophets by the spirit of prophecy and revelation. . . . Concerning this record the Prophet Joseph Smith said: 'I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth and the keystone of our religion and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.'" – From the introduction of *The Book of Mormon*

How would you respond? If God is present and active in the world, should his divine revelation cease? Why?

**What are some questions we need to explore as we seek to gain a better understanding of this issue?**

## Step 2: Study the Scriptures

### **Acts 17:10–12**

Paul’s pattern of ministry in a new town usually focused on teaching in the local synagogue. Early believers would evaluate messages from the perspective of their Jewish background.

- What source did the Bereans rely on to judge Paul’s message?

### **2 Peter 3:15–16**

Here is another instance of New Testament writings being placed with the Old Testament Scriptures as part of the biblical canon.

- How did Peter view Paul’s teaching?

### **Luke 1:1–4**

Early believers relied for leadership on those who walked and lived with Jesus to learn about his life and teaching. Over time as the church grew and the apostles grew older, a need arose to collect this information in writing. Luke, a companion to Paul, recounts how he came to write this gospel.

### Step 3: Consult Other Sources

“The Rule of Books,” by Bruce L. Shelley.

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Apostles Creed

“The Creeds and Their Role in the Church,” by John Leith.

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“DaVinci Code, Corrected,” by Craig Keener.

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The Rule of Books  
by Bruce L. Shelley

**D**uring the last great persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, early in the fourth century, a believer in Sicily was brought before the governor. He was charged with possessing a copy of the Gospels.

“Where did these come from?” asked the judge, pointing the books. “Did you bring them from your home?”

“I have no home,” replied the prisoner, “as my Lord Jesus knows.”

Once again pointing to the Gospels, the judge said, “Read them!”

The Christian opened the Gospels and read “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

He turned to another place and read again, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

That was too much. The judge ordered his prisoner away—to death.

Roman officials came to see that the suppression of Christianity demanded the destruction of the Scriptures. So the last great persecution of Christians included the burning of the Scriptures.

To this day we find it almost impossible to think of the Christian faith without the Bible. It is the foundation of Christianity’s evangelism, its teaching, its worship, and its morality. When we look back over Christian history, we find few—if any—decision more basic than those made during the first three centuries surrounding the formation of the

Bible. The Scriptures served not only as the inspiration for believers facing martyrdom, but as the supreme standard for the churches threatened by heresy. If catholic Christianity was orthodox, the Bible made it so, for the constant test of any teaching was, what do the Scriptures say?

We need to ask, then, how did we get the Bible?

**The Basics of the Bible**

The name itself—*Bible*—suggests that Christians consider these writings special. Jerome, the fourth century translator, called the “the Divine Library.” He wanted to stress that the many books were, in fact, one. Greek-speaking believers made the same point when they shifted from early plural form *Biblia*, meaning “The Books,” to *The Bible*, meaning “The Book.”

Long before, Jews had faced the same problem when they spoke of *The Scriptures* and *Scripture*. That explains how, in time, the Bible and Scripture came to mean the same thing in Christian circles, the sixty-six books that Christians consider the written word of God.

Today, we find the Scriptures grouped under *Old Testament* (or Covenant) and *New Testament*. In the ancient world a “testament” or more often a “covenant” was the term for a special relationship between two parties. Occasionally we still speak of the “marriage covenant,” which binds husband and wife to each other.

Used in the Bible, the term stands for the special relationship between God and man, initiated and sustained by the grace of the Lord God. The old covenant was first between the Lord and Abraham, then between God and Abraham's descendants, the children of Israel. Later years knew them as Jews. So the Old Testament contains the books that tell the story of the Jews and their ancient worship of God.

Early Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth was God's promised Messiah, who established a new covenant with his people, the church. So the New Testament stands for the books telling the story of Jesus Christ and the birth of the church.

The Bible contains two portions: the Old Testament, which the early Christians claimed—along with the Jews—and the New Testament, which the early Christians produced—in spite of the Jews. The Old Testament promised; the New Testament fulfilled.

The word for the special place these books occupy in Christianity is *canon*. The term from the Greek language originally meant “a measuring rod” or, as we might say, “a ruler.” It was a standard for judging something straight. So the idea transferred to a list of books that constituted the standard of “rule” of the churches. These were the books read publicly in the congregations because they had a special authority of God upon them.

Since the first Christians were all Jews, Christianity was never without a *canon*, or as we say, *Scripture*. Jesus himself clearly accepted the Old Testament as God's word to man. “Scripture cannot be broken,” he said. “Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled” (John 10:35; Luke 24:44).

Jesus believed the statements of Scripture, endorsed its teaching, obeyed its commands, and set himself to fulfill the pattern of redemption it laid down. Early Christians were simply heirs of this attitude. Had not the hopes and plans of the old covenant come true in Jesus? Had not the promised messianic age dawned in him?

Early believers went to exaggerated lengths to make the Old Testament into a Christian book. Their interpretation of Scripture often kept to the historical pattern of promise fulfillment used by the New Testament writers. But some resourceful writers went far beyond this basic theme. They soon developed a method of interpretation that discovered Jesus Christ and the Christian message all over the Old Testament. We call this allegorical interpretation, because it turns seemingly actual events, such as the crossing of the Jordan River, into a symbol of baptism or some other Christian truth.

By the third century the Church had sophisticated scholars who could defend the Christian claim to the Old Testament by the use of allegory. The most influential was a teacher at Alexandria named Origen, who spoke of the different levels of Scripture:

“The Scriptures were composed through the Spirit of God, and have both a meaning which is obvious, and another which is hidden from most readers... The whole law is spiritual, but the inspired meaning is not recognized by all—only by those who are gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit in the word of wisdom and knowledge.”

Christian appeals to allegory infuriated pagan critics of the faith because their case depended on their taking the Old Testament at face value. The move remained popular, however, since it enabled Origen and other



believers to find the Christian message just beneath the surface of the Old Testament.

## The Question of the Apocrypha

When Christians retained the Old Testament for their own use, they did not settle completely just which books this included. To this day Christians differ over the inclusion or rejection of the so-called Apocrypha in the Old Testament list of books. The term stands for twelve or fifteen books, depending on how you group them, that Roman Catholics accept as canonical and most Protestants reject.

The question is extremely complicated, but the debate centers around the fact that Jews in Palestine in the early years of Christianity had a canon corresponding to the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament. Jesus referred to this list when he spoke when he spoke of the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms (Luke 24:44). The evidence seems to indicate that neither Jesus nor his apostles ever quoted from the Apocrypha as Scripture.

Beyond Palestine, however, Jews were more inclined to consider as Scripture writing not included in this list of books. The Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint was especially influential in making known certain books of the Apocrypha because it included these books along with the Old Testament books accepted in Palestine.

Early Christians also differed, then, over the question of the Apocrypha. Believers in the eastern portion of the Roman Empire, nearest Palestine, tended to agree with the Jews in that area. In the West, however, Christians under the influence of Augustine, the well-known bishop of Hippo, usually received the Apocrypha as part of the canon

of Scripture. During the sixteenth-century Reformation most Protestants accepted the view of early Christians and rejected the Apocrypha as canonical. The Roman Catholic church, following Augustine, accepted the books. And that is how the churches differ to this day.

From the beginning, however, Christians had more than the Old Covenant as their rule for faith. During Jesus' life on earth they had the Word made flesh, and after Jesus' departure they had the living leadership of the apostles. The reverence for the apostles' message, whether oral or written, as the authentic channel to the will of the Lord Jesus, is reflected throughout early Christian literature.

During the days of the apostles congregations often read letters from the companions of the Lord. Some of these letters were obviously intended to be read in public worship, probably alongside some portion of the Old Testament or with some sermon.

Churches also relied on accounts about the life of the Lord Jesus. The first Gospels were not written before A.D. 60 or 70 but their contents were partly available in written form before this. Luke tells us that many had undertaken some account of the events of the life of Jesus.

The question is, out of this growing body of Christian literature, how did the twenty-seven books we know as the New Testament come to be set apart as Scripture? How and when did they cross the line between books regarded as important and even authoritative, and books regarded as holy and the Word of God? To put it in one word, how did they become canonical?

Several factors were at work in this process. Some were internal characteristics of the developing life of the churches, others

were external, threats to the gospel arising from the historical events and pagan influences.

First, the books that are Scripture and are truly the Word of God have about them a self-evidencing quality. They carry their uniqueness on their face. They have always exercised, and still exercise, an unparalleled power upon the lives of men.

For example, as a young man Justin Martyr searched energetically for truth in a variety of philosophical schools: first as a Stoic, then a Pythagorean, then a Platonist. But none of them satisfied him. One day, while meditating alone by the seashore, perhaps at Ephesus, he met an old man. During their conversation the stranger exposed the weaknesses of Justin's thinking and urged him to turn to the Jewish prophets. By reading Scripture, Justin became a Christian. Scores of other men and women in the early days of the church had a similar experience: Tatian, Theophilus, Hilary, Victorinus, Augustine.

One of the primary reasons, then, behind the adoption of the New Testament books as Holy Scripture was this self-authenticating quality.

Second, certain Christian books were added to Scripture because they were used in Christian worship. Even in the New Testament itself there are signs that the reading Scripture was very much a part of Christian congregational life. The apostle Paul urged the Colossians: "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16, NIV).

Justin Martyr, writing in the middle of the second century, gives us the first description of a Christian service: "On the day called the Day of the Sun all who live in

cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as the time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray." Thus, we see by Justin's time *The Memoirs of the Apostles*, which was his title for the Gospels, were a central part of Christian worship.

The mere act of reading a book in Christian worship did not assure the writing an eventual place in the canon. We know, for example, that Clement, Bishop of Rome, wrote a letter to the church at Corinth about A.D. 96 and eighty years later it was still the custom in Corinth to read Clement's letter at public worship. Yet Clement's letter was never added to the canon. Books read at the worship of the church had a special position and had started on the road that led to entrance into the canon of Scripture—but some did not make it.

Third, and perhaps the fundamental reason behind a Christian book's acceptance in to the New Testament, was its ties to an apostle. This was the test of a book's validity: Was it written by an apostle, or at least by a man who had direct contact with the circle of the apostles?

In the early church the apostles held a place that other men simply could not fill. Early believers always regarded them as men who had a unique relationship with the Lord. Did not Jesus say: "He who receives you receives me" (Matt. 10:40)?

Clement of Rome reflects this general attitude of Christians when he writes: "The apostles were made evangelists to us by the Lord Christ; Jesus Christ was sent by God. Thus Christ is from God, and the apostles from Christ...The Church is built on them as a foundation" (1 Clement 42). Any gospel of

letter, therefore, that could make a strong claim to apostolic authorship stood a good chance of acceptance as Scripture.

## A List of Christian Books

Given enough time the church, under the influence of these factors, and perhaps others, probably would have drawn up a list of canonical Christian writings. But certain events forced the hand of the churches.

About A.D. 140 a wealthy and much-traveled shipowner from Sinope on the Black Sea came to Rome. His name was Marcion. Although the son of a bishop, Marcion fell under a spell of the Gnostic teacher Cerdo, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament, he said, was unknowable; the Christian God had been revealed. The Old Testament God was sheer justice; whereas the God of the New Covenant was loving and gracious.

Marcion developed Cerdo's distinction. He held that the Old Testament God was full of wrath and the author of evil. This God, he said, was only concerned for the Jewish people. He was prepared to destroy all other people. In contrast, the Christian's God was a God of grace and love for all, who disclosed himself in Jesus Christ, his son.

Because he believed that the God of the Old Testament loved the Jews exclusively, Marcion rejected the entire Old Testament and also those New covenant writings that he thought favored Jewish readers—for example Matthew, Mark, Acts, and Hebrews. He also rejected other Christian writings that appeared to him to compromise his own views, including the Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). So he was left with only

a mutilated version of Luke's Gospel (omitting the nativity stories) and ten letters of Paul. The Apostle to the Gentiles, it seems, was the only apostle who did not corrupt the gospel of Jesus.

Marcion's garbled Christian views were firmly repudiated by the church in Rome, and Marcion was excommunicated from the church in A. D. 144. Before long, however, Marcionite churches appeared, modeled on orthodox congregations. They had their own ministers and rituals. For example, they did not use wine at communion, as a result of the ascetic emphasis of their teaching. Some of the Marcionite beliefs spilled over into the various gnostic sects, and Marcionite were themselves affected by Gnostic views. Their ideas spread, however, throughout Italy, and as far afield as Arabia, Armenia, and Egypt. In the East they exercised a considerable influence for many decades. A number of Marcionite villages existed near Damascus as late as the fourth century.

Most importantly, however, Marcion presented the orthodox churches with a twofold problem: his list of New Testament books, shaped in the image of Paul, and his rejection of the Old Testament.

Marcion's worship of Paul was little short of idolatry. As he saw it, Paul was the great enemy of the law and the great spokesman for the gospel. He was in fact the supreme figure in the church. Marcion believed Christ has descended from heaven twice, one to suffer and to die, and once to call Paul and to reveal to Paul the true significance of his death. In heaven, said Marcion, Paul sits at the right hand of Christ, who sits at the right hand of God.

AS the North African lawyer Tertullian put it, Paul had become the apostle of the heretics/ Of course, Marcion had to misinterpret Paul to make the apostle fit his

beliefs, but that didn't make the churches' problem any less real: how could they accept Paul's letters as God's word without endorsing Marcionite teaching?

In the end Paul meant too much to the church to dismiss him because of Marcion's extreme views. The apostle's letters were too well known and too widely used to discard them. The church chose, instead, to restore the Pastorals and the letters of the other apostles and to link all the letters to four Gospels by using the Book of Acts as the bridge. While the church treasured the grace of God preached by Paul, it realized that jettisoning the Old Testament was suicidal. Does the New Covenant make sense without the Old?

By retaining the Old Testament the church scored two important points. First, it insisted that faith for the Christian would have to reconcile both the wrath and the love of God. Marcion's message was too easy. By elimination the Old Testament he hoped to make the love of God central for the Christian. But love that never faces the demands of justice not Christian love. It was not the love Marcion knew! Paul found in the Cross not only death, he said, allowed God to be both just and the justifier of all who believe in Jesus (Rom. 3:25, 26). That is the marvel of the grace of God Marcion missed.

Second, by retaining the Old Testament the church underscored the importance of history for the Christian faith. Christianity is a historical religion not just in the sense that it comes from the past or that it is associated with a historical character named Jesus. It is historical because it stems from the belief that within history itself, in a particular place, at a particular time, God himself took a hand in human affairs. And that means that living by faith for the

Christian includes facing the puzzles of human existence—all of the “why, Lord?”s of life—and still believing that God has some good in mind.

If Marcion, a heretic, nudged the churches into thinking about forming a New Testament, another troublemaker, Montanus, forced the churches into thinking about closing it.

## Fresh Voices from God

Christianity has always been a religion of the Spirit. According to the fourth Gospel Jesus had promised to his people the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, to guide them (John 16:13–15). How, then, did there ever come a time when the church declared that all the inspired books that could be written had been written, and that nothing more could ever be added to the written word of God? How did it come about that, as Tertullian bitterly put it, ‘the Holy Spirit was chased into a book’?

In the second half of the second century a change was coming over the church. The days of enthusiasm were passing and the days of ecclesiasticism were arriving. The church was no longer a place where the Spirit of prophecy could be heard. More and more people were joining the churches, but the distinction between church and world was fading. The church was becoming secularized; it was coming to terms with heathen thought and culture and philosophy. The way of the cross was no longer rough and steep.

Into this situation, sometime between A.D. 156 and 172 Montanus appeared, a voice in the wilderness of Asia Minor. He came with a demand for a higher standard and a greater discipline and sharper separation of the church from the world.

Had he halted there, he could have done little but good, but he went further. He and his two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, went about prophesying in the name of the Spirit, and foretelling the speedy second coming of Christ. That in itself was not extraordinary. But these new prophets, in contrast to prophets in biblical times, spoke in a state of ecstasy, as though their personalities were suspended while the Paraclete spoke in them. Montanus was convinced that he and his prophetesses were the God-given instruments of revelation, the lyres across which the Spirit swept to play a new song. With that Montanus' super-spirituality went too far.

Clearly the church had to act. The greatest problem was disorder. Montanus as a herald of a new spiritual vitality and a new challenge to holiness was on thing; but when Montanists insisted that opposition to the new prophecy was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, many churches split over the question.

Montanus' doctrine of the new age of the Spirit suggested that the Old Testament period was past, and that the Christian period centering in Jesus had ended. The prophet claimed the right to push Christ and the apostolic message into the background. The fresh music of the Spirit could override important not of the Christian gospel; Christ was no longer central. In the name of the Spirit, Montanus denied that Do's decisive and normative revelation had occurred in Jesus Christ.

In the face of this challenge how could the church keep the gospel central? It had to make all later Christian worship, teaching, and life center in Christ and the apostolic witness. Free utterances of the Spirit would not make the original apostolic gospel basic was to set apart the apostolic writings as

uniquely authoritative. This would require all later faith and action to be judged in the light of that central message.

It was not that the church had ceased to believe in the power of the Holy Spirit. The difference was that in the first days the Holy Spirit had enabled me to write the sacred books of the Christian faith; in the later days the Holy Spirit enabled men to understand, to interpret, and to apply what had been written.

One of the reasons we know that church assumed this position lies the appearance of lists of New Testament books. One of the first is a document written about A.D. 190. We call it the Muratorian Canon, from its discoverer L.A. Muratori, who first published it in 1740. The document is damaged at the beginning, and actually begins with Luke, but its list of Ephesians, Philippians, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, Jude, 1 and 2 John, the Apocalypse of John (that is, Revelation), the Apocalypse of Peter, and The Wisdom of Solomon. The last two, we know, did not remain on the approved list. But by A.D. 190 the churches clearly accepted the idea of Christian Scriptures alongside Jewish Scriptures, one fulfilling what the other promises.

By the early third century only a handful of books continued to create any question. Hebrews faced some opposition in the western regions of the empire and Revelation was unpopular in the east. At the outset of the fourth century Eusebius, the church historian, summed up the situation and indicated that James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John and Jude were the only books "spoken against" by some while recognized by others. Revelation, however, continued to bewilder him.

The first complete list of books, as we have them today, came in an Eastern letter

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# Canon and Creed

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written in 367 by Bishop Athanasius from Alexandria. Shortly thereafter councils in North Africa at Hippo (393) and at Carthage (397) published the same list.

In one sense, of course, Christians created the canon. Their decisions concerning the books were a part of history. In another sense, however, they were only recognizing those writings that had made their authority felt in the church. The shape

of the New Testament shows that the early churches' primary aim was to submit fully to the teachings of the apostles. In that purpose they shaped the character of Christianity for all time. The faith remained catholic precisely because it was apostolic.



### The Apostle's Creed

*I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*

*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

While not inspired like Scripture, the creeds have grown out of years of reflection and teaching on Scripture, and they influence our understanding of the Bible far more than we often realize. As we have seen in this issue, the creeds are helpful in that they effectively synthesize many of the truths taught in the Bible.

We have included the Apostle's Creed as an example. It was developed between the second and ninth centuries, and is the most popular creed used in worship by Western Christians. Its central doctrines are those of the Trinity and God the Creator. This creed was used as a summary of Christian doctrine for baptismal candidates in Roman Churches.

## The Creeds and Their Role in the Church

by John Leith

Christianity has always been a “creedal” religion in that it has always been theological. It was rooted in the theological tradition of ancient Israel, which was unified by its historical credos and declaratory affirmations of faith. No pretheological era has been discovered in the New Testament or in the history of the Christian community. From the beginning Christianity has been theological, involving men in theological reflection and calling them to declarations of faith. . . .

The need for theology and for creeds arises from two basic facts. One is the nature of man as an intelligent being. “Just because he is *intelligens* the Christian, of all men, has to learn to discern with agonizing clarity what is conceivable by him about God himself.”<sup>1</sup> What cannot be thought through critically and expressed with reasonable clarity cannot demand the allegiance of man’s whole being. Understanding is necessary for man’s full commitment. Hence faith must be spoken and made intelligible. This is not to say that faith must be enclosed within the limits of reason, but it does mean that faith must require neither the closing of the mind nor the sacrifice of the integrity of the mind.

Christian faith also holds that God is the Truth and that he is the source of all truth. To be sure, God is love as well as truth, will as well as mind. While God may be truth, truth is not God. Yet if God is to be known and served, he must be known and served with the mind as well as with the heart and will. A

commitment that does not serve God with the mind is always dangerous and irresponsible. Indeed the articulation of faith in intelligible words not only clarifies faith but becomes itself the means of deeper commitment of heart and mind. Theology and creeds are the service of God through the life of the mind and are indispensable to any other service which may be rendered to God.

## I.

While creeds are an attempt to give articulate, intelligible expression to Christian faith, they, at least the great ones, are not intellectualistic. They are fashioned in history, not in the relative isolation of a scholar’s study. Christianity is first of all a historical religion, not simply in the sense that it has a history but in its conviction that God has decisively acted and made himself known in history. The great creedal affirmations of the Old and New Testaments are recitals of and reflections upon the historic events in which God is believed to have disclosed himself.

The great creeds, however, are not only rooted in history as their source and basis, but they are also framed in history and bear the marks of history. Generally speaking, creeds have not been written in the quiet periods of history but in those moments of historical intensity when the Church has been engaged by foes from without, or when its mission or life has been endangered from within. This is not to suggest that creeds are merely the products of external forces pressing upon the Church from without or of conflicts within. . . . The Christian faith of its own

<sup>1</sup> *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* by Karl Barth (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1960), pp. 20-21.



volition comes to some sort of articulate expression, and the affirmation of faith is part of the Christian's praise and thanksgiving to his God. Yet it is true that history is the *milieu* in which the creed-making process takes place, and it adds its intensity to that process and leaves its marks upon it.

Creeds have to be expressed in the language of a particular time and place. The concepts and terms which they use are datable in a particular history. The *Sitz im Leben* determines even the style and form of the creed. In certain situations the only confession needed is the simple Christological affirmation "Jesus is Lord" or "Jesus is the Christ." Other situations demand the binitarian affirmation concerning God and Christ, and in still other situations only a trinitarian confession will do. . . .

Once creeds have come into being, they begin to shape history also. The Nicene faith, for example, influenced the piety, worship, and cultural involvement of subsequent generations of Christians. The theological reflections that are embodied in creeds become part of the theological memory of the Church and are the source and context for future theological decisions. None of the great creeds of the Church were produced independently of what the Church thought and said in previous generations.

Creeds are likewise judged by history as well as produced in history. The Creed of Nicaea is a notable example of a creed that had to wait the confirmation of history. It was debated by the Church for fifty years before it became the consensus of the Church. Creeds cannot be imposed by simple fiat upon the Church. They are examined, corrected, rejected, and confirmed by history. In the long run, they have to be confirmed not by some assembly so much as by the common-sense wisdom of the Christian community. To use a

Quaker term, they must become the "sense of the meeting" to have abiding authority.

The great creeds are not only marked by historicity but also by catholicity. They are never intentionally sectarian. They intend to state the faith of the Christian Church. In the Ancient Church the creed-making process was itself notably catholic. The Definition of Chalcedon was the product of the theology of Antioch, of Alexandria, and of Rome and the West. The result was different from and better than that which these schools of theology could have produced alone. . . . Many creeds that have been catholic in intention have not been catholic in fact. Indeed some creeds have been written with the purpose of excluding persons who considered themselves Christian. Yet even this restriction of the Christian community is done in the name of a true catholicity. Perhaps creeds are most catholic when they claim to be so only in intention and purpose. The absolute claim to have achieved catholicity has never yet been fully confirmed and becomes in itself destructive of catholicity. The creeds with the greatest claim to catholicity, such as the Nicene, are limited to basic affirmation; and their catholicity has been achieved, and in some measure produced by them, in a long history.

Closely related to the catholicity of the creedal process is its communal character. Some creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed, are wholly anonymous. They simply grew out of the life of the Church. Even the great creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon were not so much produced as they were amended or collected from the creedal store of the Church. The creeds that are largely the work of one man . . . are unintelligible apart from the community of faith in which the author participated. Theology is the servant of the community. . . . The great doctrines of the

Church were affirmed in worship and experience before they were written on paper or authorized by councils. “A doctrinal system, a developed liturgy, a settled polity, all these are achievements possible only within a community that has its life and power from another originating source than these.”<sup>2</sup>

The creeds of the Church, in addition to being the products of the community of faith more than of individual effort, can only be used within the Christian community. A confession, to be sure, is always an individual act; but it is an act that takes place in community. In many of the creeds the communal nature of the confession is explicitly affirmed in the affirmation of the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints. The corporate confession of the creed realizes the communion of saints and bolsters the faith of the individual by the faith of the Church.

## II.

The church liturgy has been one of the primary occasions that called for the development of creeds; for worship is incomplete without an affirmation of faith in hymn, prayer, and sermon. The confession of faith is an essential moment in the life of a Christian. In confession the believer speaks out before men and with men the silent thought and affirmation of his heart and mind. He makes outward what is inward.<sup>3</sup> In confession the believer takes his stand, commits his life, declares what he believes to be true, affirms his ultimate loyalty, and defies every false claim upon his life. The confession

<sup>2</sup> *The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek* by Albert Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 66.

<sup>3</sup> *Creed and the Creeds* by John Huntley Skrine (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1911), pp. 34ff.

of faith is the seal of faith and the courage of faith.

The confession of faith is never merely a matter of the mind, as important as the mind may be. For the confession commits more than the mind. It commits all of life. It must be affirmed with the whole person. Hence creeds can never be learned simply from books, though this learning is surely important. They must be learned in the midst of the community of worshiping and believing people who share in a common life of which the creed is a common affirmation. The confession of faith is a living sacrifice when the believer offers by the help of words his whole personality to his Creator.<sup>4</sup>

The liturgical life of the Church called for creeds of various types. A creedal statement was needed as a guide for preaching. Such a statement, in contrast to a creed used in baptism, could be flexible both as to form and content and of greater length. Flexibility and lack of precise language were in fact desirable as they allowed for creative theological work. . . .

Creedal statements were from the beginning associated with baptism. The importance of this rite for the development of creeds is very considerable. . . .

One of the oldest confessions of the Church is reflected in the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. Here the eunuch himself asks, “What is to prevent my being baptized?” (Acts 8:36–38). Philip replied, “If you believe with all your heart, you may,” and he answered, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” . . .

The creedal form that was apparently most commonly used in the baptismal rites of the second and third centuries was interrogatory. The affirmation of faith took place through the

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

baptizand's response to the officiant's questions. . . .

The creed had been introduced into the Holy Communion by the latter part of the fifth century. By this time creedal patterns were already established. . . .

Another important source of creedal development was the teaching ministry of the Church. This was focused in the preparation of candidates for baptism. Creedal statements served as the basis for the famous catechetical lectures that were given in this preparation. The candidate was taught the faith that had been maintained in the Church since the days of the Apostles. Catechetical instruction was not a free-lance operation but was the responsible traditioning, the authoritative delivery, of the faith. . . .

The teaching ministry also served as the source of another important creedal form, the catechism. Augustine recognized the importance of the question-and-answer method of theological education, and the Church increasingly made use of it. . . . The catechetical method had the advantage not only of providing clear and precise statements of Christian theology, but also of raising the important questions and in particular the questions for which Christian faith is the answer. In less stereotyped forms, as Augustine pointed out, it enabled the teacher to understand the theological development and insight of the pupil.

Still another need that was served by the creeds was the Church's concern for hermeneutics. Originally, the Church had to declare how it would understand the Old Testament and what the substance of the Apostolic tradition was. After the Apostolic witness was put into writing, the Church had to have some measure by which to determine which books were canonical, that is, genuinely apostolic. After the canon of the New

Testament was fixed, it was still necessary to provide some principle of interpretation to distinguish the centrally important from the peripheral and to put together in some coherent way the diversity of the New Testament testimony. . . .

The creed is simply the Church's understanding of the meaning of Scripture. The creed says, Here is how the Church reads and receives Scripture.<sup>5</sup> The whole history of theology is the history of the interpretation of Scripture, even though the theologians do not always cite Biblical references. In general, the victories in the great theological debates have gone to those who have been the most convincing interpreters of Scripture. The creeds are the record of the Church's interpretation of the Bible in the past and the authoritative guide to hermeneutics in the present.

The rise of heresy was still another situation that created the need for creeds. Heresy is so important a factor in the origin of creeds that it tempts the commentator to exaggerate its role. As was said long ago, creeds are signposts to heresies. The task of the creed was to defend the Church against heresy. The creed has the negative role of shutting the heretic out and setting the boundaries within which authentic Christian theology and life can take place. These functions of the creed account in some instances for the choice of words and also for the items of theological affirmation. Yet it is a mistake to attribute creeds simply to heresy, for there would be creeds even if there were no heretics. In fact, theology can become the subject of debate apart from heresy. It may well be that the creeds, without the heretics, would not be as good as they are; for the

<sup>5</sup> *Explication de la Confession de Foi de la Rochelle* by Roger Mehl (Paris: Collection "Les Bergers et les Mages"), pp. 10ff.

heretics made their contributions. They required the Church to think through theological issues when it did not want to do so. They made the Church exercise care in theological language so that the language of theology would say what the Christian community wanted to say. Creeds are not due simply to the heretics, but they would be much poorer creeds without the heretics.

Creeds are also a standard, a battle cry, a testimony and witness to the world. . . . Christian faith is not only the gift of God's grace; it is also a command, a task. It is a battle against the "world, the flesh, and the devil." The creed is a marching song, a battle cry. In this fact resides some of the truth in the assertion that creeds are to be sung.

### III.

The word creed suggests authority, but the exact nature and extent of creedal authority is a difficult question. There is no one answer that satisfies all Christians. On one extreme the creed is almost identified with the Word of God. On the other extreme creeds are minimized and dogmatic Christianity is regarded as a mistake, or at best an unfortunate necessity.

The attempt to dispense with dogma and to minimize creeds has never been successful. As has been indicated, there has never been a nontheological period in the history of the Church. Even when the Church has been held together only by a common life in the Spirit, a creed has always been implicit. The endeavor to have no creed but the Bible is successful only so long as there is common agreement as to what the Bible teaches. In the long run, organizational necessities demonstrate the need for creeds, and organizational integrity requires some kind of creedal subscription. The attempt to minimize creeds and to

magnify Christianity without dogma runs aground either on the theological nature of Christian faith or on the nature of man, who is body as well as spirit, and who cannot get along without organizational structure.

The attempt to assert intentionally or unintentionally the absolute authority of creeds is predicated upon particular views of truth, of man, and of community. The creedal absolutist is likely to believe that propositional statements are fully adequate vehicles for truth. He must also believe that men, at least some men, are both good enough and wise enough, at least in certain situations, to know the truth in a final and definitive way. He is also likely to believe that community can exist only on the basis of full agreement as to truth propositionally stated. Over against the creedal absolutist, there is a considerable body of Christians who insist that, however useful and indispensable propositional statements may be as the embodiment of truth, the ultimate and final embodiment of the wisdom of God is the Person of Jesus Christ. Man's apprehension of the Word of God is never ultimate and final, for every man's theology is limited by his finiteness and his sin. Finally, the Christian community existed prior to the formulation of Christian faith in exact and precise creeds. None of this means that creeds are not indispensable pointers to the wisdom of God and necessary boundaries for Christian living, but it does reject every effort to absolutize a human achievement as idolatry and as, in the end, destructive of community. When creeds have been made absolute, someone always rises to protest in the name of the Word of God, which stands in judgment on every human word.

The awareness that every creed is a human achievement and subject to limitation by man's finiteness and sinfulness is the source of a truly Christian liberalism. The Church has

the task not simply of the reformation of the world but also of the reformation of itself. Every human achievement in creed as well as elsewhere must be continually reformed by the Christian community's apprehension of the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

It remains to be noticed again that creeds do not receive their authority merely through the fiat of ecclesiastical authority. H. E. W. Turner has pointed out the importance of the

common-sense wisdom of the Christian community, which in the long run is sounder than the action of church councils or the judgment of scholars.<sup>6</sup> Creeds become authoritative when they become the common-sense wisdom, the consensus of the Christian community. The final authority of a creed is the witness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, an authority that in its deepest dimensions is always personal.



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<sup>6</sup> *Pattern of Christian Truth* by H. E. W. Turner (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd., 1954), p. 498.

## DaVinci Code, Corrected

by Craig Keener

What should we make of the claim in Dan Brown's popular novel *The Da Vinci Code* that Constantine created the New Testament canon and suppressed 80 "gospels" in favor of the now-established four?

It is true that many works about Jesus (now labeled gospels) circulated both in the first century and later. But Brown's claim is hardly serious history; the vast majority of Christians had been reading precisely our four Gospels as Scripture since the second century at least, as writings from Irenaeus make clear. Church authorities did not wait until Constantine to fish out gospel pretenders.

In fact, the decision to canonize certain gospels rested far more on the dependable teachings handed down from the apostles to bishops than on any imperial fiat. Irenaeus, the first bishop to identify the books of the New Testament, was a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn was a disciple of Ignatius, disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus narrowed the canon not according to his own whims or interpretations, but through the "rule of faith" (a loosely formulated confession of faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the saving work of Jesus) handed down by the apostolic church.

Further, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John differ in kind from the second- and third-century works called "gospels," which reflect little or no apostolic tradition and do not even fit the same genre as the canonical Gospels. The four first-century Gospels we possess are, as the church long understood and recent scholarship has confirmed, ancient *bioi*, or "lives" of Jesus. (A *bios* focused on the most relevant events of a person's life, commonly

leaving gaps in the chronology.) These Gospels include many elements of Jesus' Judean culture, Aramaic figures of speech, and so on; this differs sharply from later stories written about Jesus.

By contrast, second-century and later gospels tend to fall into two categories: "sayings-gospels" (favored especially by Gnostics) and religious novels (what we usually call the apocryphal gospels). Gnostics belonged to a stream of thought that played down the body (hence Jesus' incarnation, earthly life, and bodily resurrection). Their tastes ran more to secret teachings for an elite—what we find in most gnostic gospels. Irenaeus distinguished the canonical Gospels from gnostic ones with the observation that the four Gospels focus on Jesus' death and resurrection, and that the writers root their claims about Jesus in references to Hebrew Scripture. Gnostics were not willing to do this.

Most other ancient gospels are essentially novels seeking to embellish the original accounts. Notably, the Jesus of many "gospels" lacks the character of the Jesus in our first-century Gospels.

Thus, for example, in the Infancy Story of Thomas (not the same as the earlier Gospel of Thomas), Jesus strikes dead a boy who bumped him. When the deceased boy's parents complain to Joseph, Jesus strikes them blind. When another observer complains because Jesus made clay sparrows on the Sabbath, Jesus claps his hands and the birds fly off.

Most novelistic gospels were fairly "orthodox" and simply appealed to the popular imaginations of many Christians eager to fill in gaps of what was known about Jesus'

earthly life. Yet a work can be edifying and widely recommended without meeting the church's criteria for canonicity.

The canon's Gospels had to stem from those who knew Jesus directly—or from the close associates of those who did—to guarantee authenticity.

In short, the “lost gospels” simply did not meet the standards of Irenaeus's “rule of faith.” No 4<sup>th</sup>-century imperial directive was needed to suppress these works; the church had long ago disavowed them as Scripture.







## Step 5: Discuss the Issue

1. What questions do you struggle with or what questions have been posed to you about the Bible?
2. What would be the implications of saying that the Old Testament is not relevant to the Christian faith?
3. What scriptural base can you find for scripture as a source of authority?
4. Does the concept of canon imply that the church decided what would be God's word? Why?
5. Montanus argued that the Holy Spirit was opening a new age in the church. On what basis did the church reject his teaching?
6. What are some examples of ways in which people today claim "new" revelation? On what basis can believers today reject the claims of "new" revelation by others?
7. As you reviewed this lesson and discussion, what do you need to reexamine regarding how you understand and respond to scripture?



## Issue Evaluation Form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please make brief comments on any of the following aspects of this issue:**

**Sound Bites and Case Studies** (Were any of these particularly helpful or unhelpful? Are there any quotes or scenarios you think we should add?):

**Study the Scriptures** (Were the passages selected appropriate? Are there other passages you might have added?):

**Consult Other Sources** (What were your overall impressions of the articles? Did they hold your interest? Were they instructive? Are there any you would drop or add?):

**Form a Response & Take Steps to Obey** (Were the exercises helpful and meaningful? Are there any you would drop or add?):

**Discuss the Issue** (Were any of the questions particularly unhelpful or especially helpful? Were they clear? Did your group discuss any issues that could be added to our list of questions?):

**Overall Impression of this Issue** (Please rate the issue 5= Outstanding, 1= Poor. Also include any general impressions or comments regarding this issue.):

1      2      3      4      5

**Corrections** (typos, grammatical errors, wrong passages, etc.):