

## **Canon, Creed, and Bishops**

This lesson is entitled “To Mark a Path: Canon, Creed, and Bishops.” I will use a very famous ancient prayer as we begin today. It is called the “Agnus Dei,” which means “the Lamb of God” in Latin. This prayer is based on some very familiar passages of Scripture where Christ is set forth as the Lamb of God. We know this prayer was used in the early church. It appears in the form in which we will pray it in the fifth or sixth century in the worship service of the church in Rome, but undoubtedly it was in use many years or even centuries before that. It begins with the phrase, “Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us.” These words have appeared since then in many of the liturgies of the Christian church, both Catholic and Protestant. As we pray remember we are praying a very ancient prayer that God’s people used in the very early days of the Christian church. Let us pray together. I will read these words, and you pray them in your hearts with me. Let us pray.

*“Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us. Jesus, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us. Jesus, redeemer of the world, give us Your peace. Amen.”*

We have been looking now for some time at the history of the early church. We have seen how the church grew, not only in the West in Europe but also in the East in Asia. We have seen how the church endured during two-and-a-half centuries of persecution or the threat of persecution. We have studied how the church resisted attacks from the outside. The apologists wrote books in order to answer the attacks on Christianity from enemies of the Christian faith. And we have seen how the church resisted attacks from the inside, the heresies that began to develop such as Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism. Today we will look at how the church organized and defined itself. That process was happening anyway, but certainly the emergence of the heresies forced the church to move more quickly in this important work of understanding what it really was, what it stood for, what the truth was, and what Christian people would believe and die for. Irenaeus, the church father of the second century, said: “The authority of the church rests on three things. It rests on the canon of the Bible, the books that are to be accepted as the authentic, authoritative books of the Christian church. Secondly, it rests on the Apostolic Creed as the normative rule of faith. And thirdly, it rests on the episcopate, the bishops as the guardians and expositors of truth and of Scripture.”

So we have those three points—canon, creed, and bishops—to mark out a path for the early church to follow in its development and in its life as it went forth to face the world. We will take each of those in turn. We will talk first about the canon, then about the creed, and then about the bishops.

The word “canon” simply means “the rule that is to be followed.” We could also refer to it as the Bible. What books are in the Bible? What books are to be accepted? The problem the early church faced was that there were not only in circulation the books that eventually became known as canonical—the 27 books of our New Testament—but there were other books too. These other books included The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Peter, The Shepherd of Hermas, First Clement, and The Didache. These books were being circulated along with Romans, Acts, Luke, Peter, and Revelation. The church faced an urgent task here. It was urgent that the church reach a decision early on while it was still close to its apostolic roots. You can see that the matter of establishing the canon was not something that could be put off for centuries. It had to be done early on when the church still had the possibility of investigating these books as to their source, their author, and how they were to be accepted. Not only was it important to do that quickly before too many decades or centuries had gone by, but it was also important to do it because heresies were raising this question.

Marcion had already created his own canon, a very restricted canon with only a few New Testament books and none of the Old Testament. Montanis had gone to the other extreme and said that some of the contemporary utterances given by the Holy Spirit through him and his associates were to be added to the canon as equivalent to the books of Scripture. The church faced the task, then, of determining what books were to be accepted as the true books of God to be added to the books of the Old Testament. Now, “Old Testament” and “New Testament” were not terms that were in use at that time, but I will use those terms for the sake of simplicity. The idea of a canon or a Bible was something the Christian church inherited from the Jews. The Jews already had their canon. They had established their own canon, which we call the Old Testament. So the Christian church coming out of the Jews inherited the idea of the canon as well as the thing itself. The books of the Hebrew canon became part of the books of the Christian Bible. Christians were “people of the book,” just as the Jews were. Immediately as the church came into existence it had a Bible, the Old Testament. This was the Christian Bible. There was never any question about that except from the Marcionists. The orthodox Christians accepted the Old Testament Scriptures from the very beginning. There were some other books that were written during the Inter-Testamental Period, the period between the Testaments. Some Christians thought that these books ought to be included in the Old Testament canon. Jerome was the translator of the Vulgate, a great Bible scholar whom we will talk about later. As we come to his time, Jerome clearly distinguished between the Old Testament books the Jews accepted—the 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament—and these deuterocanonical books that some people thought should be added to the Old Testament. Some of those deuterocanonical books became part of the Roman Catholic Bible. The Roman Catholic Old Testament, as you may know, has more books in it today than the Protestant Old Testament. I have a Catholic booklet whose title is “Who took these books out of the Bible?” These books include Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Tobit, and some others that come from the inter-testamental period. But the better question would be, who put those books into the Bible? By the time we get to Jerome it is quite clear that those books did not belong in the Bible. They began to be accepted in Roman Catholic history in the medieval period and were officially incorporated into the Catholic Bible at the Council of Trent in the 16th century. So, the Christian church from the beginning adopted the Jewish Old Testament in the Protestant form, the same books we have today in the Protestant Old Testament.

What about the New Testament? The church realized that along with the authoritative books of the Old Testament there were certain books that were Scripture and should be viewed as equal to the Law and the Prophets. The process of the Christian church in determining exactly what books belong in that New Testament canon was a process that took some time. And this process did not proceed at the same pace in every part of the Christian church. One church would have a different list from another church. For instance, about the year 200 AD there was a bishop of Antioch who wrote some Christians at a nearby church, saying that he had changed his mind about the Gospel of Peter since his visit with them. He had apparently been with that church and had told them, “I think you should have the Gospel of Peter as part of the Scripture.” Then he went back home, thought about it some more and perhaps received more information, and changed his mind. Therefore he wrote to that church and told them, “Do not add the Gospel of Peter. It is not part of Scripture.” You can see how this process would have taken some time and would not have proceeded at the same pace throughout the church. We usually use the date 367 AD as the date for the church’s completion of its study as to the extent of the canon, in a list drawn up by the church father Athanasius in Alexandria. That is a pretty late date, 367 AD. But this is kind of the final, authoritative statement from a church bishop—“These are the books, and only these.” But for all practical purposes the New Testament church had come to this same decision many, many years before 367 AD.

Now, how did the church come to that decision? How did the church decide what books were to be accepted and what books were not to be accepted? I think it is important to be clear on this. In a very

important sense the New Testament canon was complete when the last book of the New Testament was written, when John wrote the Apocalypse (Revelation) in the last decade of the first century. When that book was written, that was the end of the New Testament canon. So it was not, then, that the church had to create the canon or make the books into the Word of God by making its decision to accept those books. But the church had to go through the process, providentially guided by God, of recognizing which books of all the books out there truly bore the stamp of God's authority. It was a process of recognition rather than an imposition. The Roman Catholic view is more with the latter, that it was a process of imposition. Scripture is Scripture because the church says it is. The church drew up the list, and by making that list they made those books included in the list to be Scripture. The Roman Catholics would see the making of the canon as the definitive action of the church putting its stamp of approval on a book, which then makes it the Word of God. The Protestant view is quite different here. The Protestant view is that Scripture is Scripture because it is Scripture. It would still be Scripture whether the church recognized it to be or not. But God in His providence enabled the church to come to so recognize those books as Scripture. Dr. Warfield has illustrated it this way: Scripture is the road and the church is the sign or the guidepost. The church says, "This is the right road." It is not the sign that makes the road a road. The sign simply indicates to people that this is the road. So as the church drew up the list that became known as the canon of the New Testament, it was simply recognizing that which is indeed true, that these books are from God.

Now you might ask how the church did that. I think the church operated on two principles in its work to establish clearly for itself and all succeeding generations the extent of the canon. The first and most important is external evidence. Where did this book come from? Who was it written by? Was it written by an apostle? If it really was written by an apostle then that settled it. That is why the Gospel of Peter from some time seemed to be accepted as part of the New Testament. After all, it was from Peter. But then Christians discovered it really was not from Peter. It was named the Gospel of Peter, but it was written by someone else. So the books were considered for acceptance if they were written by an apostle or—this had to be expanded a bit—if they were written by someone of the apostolic company. An example would be Mark. He was not an apostle, but he was certainly part of the apostolic company as he was an associate of Peter. The church looked for the origins of the book because Jesus had promised His authority to the apostles. It was to them that He was going to give all truth. He was going to give them the Spirit that they might understand all things. And as we study the history of this period we see this principle actually being worked out in practice.

Polycarp was a very early and a very respected church father. There might have been some temptation to put the writings of Polycarp on the same level with the writings of the apostles because he came so close after those apostles. But when Polycarp was writing his letter to the Philippians he said this, "Certainly neither I nor anyone like me can follow the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul who taught you accurately and firmly the Word of truth." Not too many years after Paul wrote to the Philippians, Polycarp wrote to the Philippians and said, "This is a pastoral letter, but it is not on the same level with the letter you received from Paul. That is the Word of truth. This is my sermon, my advice, my counsel to you." Thus we see that external evidence was important. Where did the book come from? Did it come from an apostle or someone from the apostolic community? Linked with that was the matter of internal evidence. This was the second principle used by the church in this process. Does the book really in what it says support, undergird, and expand properly what we knew to be the Word of God? What we knew then to be the Word of God came both from the Old Testament and from the books that early on were without dispute in the New Testament, like the Synoptic Gospels and Paul's letters. One church historian has put it this way: "What the church has received in the New Testament stands on an incomparably higher level than all other Christian literature. None of the writings of the apostolic fathers can even compare with those of the New Testament. None of the so-called New Testament Apocrypha

can remotely be compared with what was accepted in the New Testament.” I think that is true, but I think that has to be used in connection with the first principle, external evidence. You can find wonderful statements of truth in other literature, and you can find in the New Testament some statements that seem difficult and perplexing. So if you were only going by internal evidence you might make some mistakes. But the church worked on the principles of both external evidence and internal evidence.

Let me illustrate that briefly by talking about *The Shepherd of Hermas*. That was a book written in the second century. I read an article in “*Bible Review*” some years ago about this book. The title of the article was “An early tale that almost made it into the New Testament.” The author of this article went on to say that this book did not quite make the final cut, but it was very close and could well have made it into the New Testament. Actually, *The Shepherd of Hermas* was considered to be authoritative Scripture by Irenaeus and by Clement of Alexandria, two pretty big names in the history of the early church. This book was even considered to be Scripture by Tertullian for a while, until he became a Montanist and his theology shifted and he put it out because it did not follow in his new views. But as the church looked at *The Shepherd of Hermas*, which was on the list in some areas for quite a while, there were two things that began to impress Christians generally. One was that it was not written by an apostle. It was written by someone named Hermas who lived in Rome in the second century. The book did not have that apostolic stamp on it. And second, the more people read *The Shepherd of Hermas* the more people realized that this book was mainly concerned with penance, repentance, and how many times a person can be forgiven of a major sin. That did not seem to fit with the teaching of the rest of the Bible that had been accepted. Also, there was some rather dubious teaching about the Trinity that was not at all in line with what the church eventually came to accept at the Council of Nicea in the fourth century. Therefore, based on external evidence and internal evidence, *The Shepherd of Hermas* was not included in the canon. This was not because the church put it out of the Bible, but because the church was able to see that this was not an authoritative book inspired by the Holy Spirit to be added to the canon of Scripture. (This is just a quick overview of this process from the standpoint of church history.) It was important for the church to establish the canon. Certainly by 367 AD that was done. It was really done, for all practical purposes, a long time before that.

Something else the church did was to establish a creed. The first creeds were very short statements. We find some of those even in the New Testament itself. For example, when Peter said to Jesus, “You are the Christ,” that is a creed. Paul in Romans said, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” That is also a creed. These tiny creeds served to identify Christ and also to identify the followers of Jesus. In that way they acted as passwords among the faithful. These early, brief creeds were known as symbols. One of the most famous of these was “I believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God, our Savior.” In Greek that formed an acrostic, which was “Ichthus.” This word means “fish.” Sooner or later Christians began to simply draw a little symbol of the fish as a confession, a tiny, brief confession of faith. That symbol said, “Christ is God’s Son, and He is my Savior.” It both said who Christ is and who the person is who made that confession by either saying those words or by drawing the symbol of the fish on the walls of the catacombs, or a building in Rome, or elsewhere. That has come down to the present so that today we see and use this symbol often for the confession of the Christian faith.

But these tiny expressions began to be expanded a bit. The most famous of the expanded versions of the earliest confessions we call the Apostles’ Creed. By tradition the Apostles’ Creed was written by the apostles. That tradition was embellished a bit so that it was said that as the apostles prepared to go into all the world and preach the Gospel as Jesus had commanded them, it was important that they agree on the message that they were going to preach. And so before they set out, on or around Pentecost, being

filled with the promised Spirit they pieced together the creed that bears their name. Peter began, “I believe in God the Father Almighty,” Andrew who standing next to him added, “and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord,” James picked it up, “who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,” and on it went around the circle until Matthew finished by saying, “And the life everlasting, amen.” Then they were ready to go out and preach. That is a rather attractive story in some ways but it is certainly not true. The Apostles’ Creed was not written by the apostles. It is called the Apostles’ Creed because it embraced apostolic teaching, or at least some basic apostolic teaching. This creed grew out of confessions of faith that would be said at baptisms. As people were baptized into the Christian church they were asked to state their faith, in a trinitarian formula: “Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?” From Rome came the early pattern that eventually evolved into the famous Apostles’ Creed. Although, apparently the rather controversial statement in the creed, “He [Jesus] descended into hell,” was not added to the Apostles’ Creed until much, much later.

We have, then, the creeds developing. We will see how these creeds developed even further as we study more in the history of the church. And a rule of faith was spoken of by the church fathers. The rule of faith is the Apostles’ Creed, but it is more than that. It is not something written down that we can read. It is something passed down from church father to church father. It is not a separate code equal to Scripture, at least not yet, but it is an affirmation of what the Scripture teaches. The church fathers began to speak of the rule of faith as that body of belief that summarizes the teaching of the Bible (like the Apostles’ Creed does but more than that) and that guards the faith from heretical teachings and perversions. Origen said, “The rule of faith is that which has been handed down from the apostles through the order of succession.” The rule of faith is something that is passed on not generally in the church but only from church father to church father, or from bishop to bishop. The rule of faith provides some way for the church to say to the Gnostics, for example, “You are outside the rule of faith. This is not what the church has held from the beginning.”

I want to go just one step further on this point and then we will go to point number three. The church tried to explain this rule of faith. It is nebulous. You are probably wondering, well what is it? You may not be able to quite understand what I am saying about it, but I cannot be more precise because it was not more precise. The problem was still there, the problem of discerning what Christian faith was and what error was. In the fifth century a very famous statement was drawn up by a theologian named Vincent of Lerins in which he defined the catholic faith as this: “That which is believed everywhere, always, and by everyone.” Now, you will hear “Vincent’s Rule” throughout church history, and from time to time I will refer to it. When I say “Vincent’s Rule” this is what I mean: “The catholic faith is that which is believed everywhere, always, and by everyone.” Thus the catholic faith is defined by ecumenicity (it is believed everywhere), antiquity (believed always), and consent of the faithful (believed by all). These three points mark the catholic faith according to Vincent. This is a very nice formula and it would be nice if it worked. But there are two problems with it. One is the historical problem. It simply is not true. You might say that in one sense it is true; if you could know the invisible Church, God’s true people, then perhaps you could apply this rule to the faith of that Church. But I think we have to say that what comes to be known as the catholic faith was believed almost everywhere, usually, and by most of the people. This is not quite as neat as Vincent set it up, and we will have to trace that as we go along. There is also a theological problem with that statement, I think. Universality is not always the guardian of the truth. In fact, as we move further into the medieval period it will seem as if the Christian faith is believed by a very few people, in a very few places, and fairly recently. Might not the true church turn out to be a small church, not the big church? That is getting far ahead of the story, but as we come to the Middle Ages there will be times when we will ask ourselves, “Where is the true church now? It does not seem as if what we are studying is the true Christian church.”

Let us move on quickly to bishops. The canon was established, the creeds were drawn up, the rule of faith—as ambiguous as it was—was at least talked about as guaranteeing or helping to develop the true teaching of the Christian church and preserving it from error. The third means the early church used to organize itself and to protect itself from false teaching had to do with church order. In the New Testament and in the first century, church order appeared quite clearly to be twofold: there were elders and there were deacons. When the word “bishop” is used in the New Testament it means elder. So there is only a twofold order of church government. I think it is quite interesting that even those who approve of the development of the church from this simple twofold order into a more hierarchical style, an episcopacy—such as Roman Catholics and Episcopalians—those who have studied this admit that in the first century it was this way. Stuart Hall in his *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* says this, “One should note that there is no indication that either in Rome or in Corinth there was a single presiding bishop in the first century rather than a board of elders.” What that means, coming from this Episcopalian scholar, is that in the first century there were presbyters and a presbytery. It is nice for a Presbyterian to read that, written by an Episcopalian. But it was not too long before things changed. By the second century there were bishops. These were not New Testament elders but bishops who stood higher, in a hierarchical arrangement. Under them were elders (or pastors) and then deacons.

Where did the bishops come from, and why? I will just point out two names from the second century that supported this development. Ignatius of Antioch early in the century talked about a single bishop who was higher than the elders or deacons. Thus at the time of Ignatius, at least in Antioch, there was a hierarchical form of a bishop, elders, and deacons. There was a threefold order rather than the twofold order of the first century. Irenaeus in the late second century added the idea of apostolic succession to this. The bishops who ruled the church were said to be able to trace their appointment back to the apostles. The apostles appointed successors who then appointed successors, and so on. This is the idea of apostolic succession. That important concept is restricted to the office of bishop. I think historically we would say the office of bishop developed not from the apostles who did not appoint successors, but out of the ranks of the presbyters. In a place like Rome there would be a number of presbyters because there were a number of churches. Eventually one of these presbyters gained ascendancy over the others and became the head of the church of Rome, the bishop. Then he began to be viewed as, in some sense, the continuation of the apostolate. This will be developed later as we begin to study real Roman Catholic structure and theology in the medieval period. But I will not go any further at this point than to say that in the second century we see emerging monarchical bishops. “Monarchical” means that there was only one bishop in charge of a whole group of churches in a location like Rome or Corinth.

Why did that happen? A writer has talked about one bishop, Cyprian in North Africa. He said that Cyprian developed the habit of telling other bishops what they ought to do. Thus there were certainly human factors involved in this. There are people who are more ambitious, better organized, and more forceful. Presbyters like this began to emerge as more than presbyters, as bishops, because they took the authority, made the decisions, and told others what to do. There could have been some sinful pride and ambition mixed up in all of that. Not stressing that point too much let me move on to say that there were two reasons why the bishops were added to the structure of the church government. One reason was efficiency. It simply worked better this way, to have one man in charge. We Presbyterians might think that Presbyterian church government is the most biblical, but I do not know that I would necessarily argue that it is the most efficient. It takes us a long time to get anything done, whereas a bishop can decide on the spot, take care of the problem, and move on to something else. Thus the temptation toward efficiency was certainly a factor. Also, concern for orthodoxy was a reason for this development. Someone had to stand up for the truth and not allow the church to drift into heresy. Strong orthodox bishops did stand for the truth and thereby increased their own prestige.

As all of this happened each area began to get its own monarchical bishop. You can see how the monarchical bishops of certain areas would be more prominent than other monarchical bishops, depending on the city they served. The most important churches then began to emerge. In the East there were five such churches: Jerusalem, Caesarea, Antioch—which already in the first and second centuries were important Christian centers—Alexandria in Egypt was added in the third century, and then finally Constantinople was added in the fourth century. Thus in the East there were five primary centers of Christianity. The bishops of these churches were the most important. Eventually the bishop of one of these churches, who will be called the patriarch, would become the most important in the East—Constantinople. But at first there were five churches. In the West there was only one, Rome. From the very beginning of this development the church in the West that others looked to for direction and advice was the church of Rome. All of this caused huge problems later, particularly between Constantinople and Rome. This is because as the primary Christian centers narrowed down to two, it became a contest to see who was the greater of the two. The Roman bishop knew which was the greater; he said it over and over again. The patriarch of Constantinople did not like his suggestion, and so eventually that was one of the major factors that led to the division of the church in the East and the church in the West.

Canon, creed, and bishops. You can see how those three factors were important in the consolidation and definition of the Christian faith. Before we end this lesson, I want us to turn to the Apostles' Creed. Let us confess our faith together using these ancient words that I have talked about today. Remember that as we confess our faith we are not merely repeating the Apostles' Creed. When introducing the Apostles' Creed in your churches do not do so by saying, "Let us repeat the Apostles' Creed." We are not simply repeating something someone else believed. We are confessing our faith. We are making a vow ourselves using these ancient words. As we do so, we do so in the company of a vast multitude of believers in all times and in all places. These believers at many times were standing in the face of great persecution and have confessed their faith using these same words. They lived in a time when all sorts of ideas were going around and people believed all sorts of different things, and we live in a time like that as well. But let us say together what we believe. O Christian, what do you believe?

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,  
the Creator of heaven and earth,  
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:  
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended into hell.  
The third day He arose again from the dead.  
He ascended into heaven  
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,  
whence He shall come 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.

It has been asked, is there any truth to the proposition that Peter was the first pope? The short answer would be no. Peter was in Rome, we think. Peter probably was put to death in Rome during the

Neronian persecution. But the Roman church had been founded long before either Peter or Paul arrived. Paul got there perhaps before Peter did, but as you know he had already written to the Romans. A strong church was there. We do not know who the first pope, or pastor, of the church in Rome was. There is no evidence that Peter was really pastor of the church in Rome at any point. He was a visiting brother and preacher who may have preached in one or more of the churches in Rome. We would expect that he would. But I would say there is no real, historical evidence for calling Peter the first pope of Rome. I think Roman Catholics even struggle with that as well. The reason Peter has to be the first pope for the Roman Catholic Church is a dogmatic reason, not an historical one. They say that Christ gave to Peter the keys of the kingdom, and those keys are then passed on to successive popes of the Church of Rome. Thus this is a dogmatic view rather than an historical view.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1).