

CHURCH HISTORY (5): Nicene (2)

In this lesson we want to examine the early church's view of Scripture. We will begin with the formal recognition of the 27 NT books, then briefly consider the relation of Scripture to tradition (esp. the Apostles' Creed), and then survey three schools of interpretation that arose in the third and fourth centuries.

I. The Early Church and Scripture

1. *Its recognition.* "The word 'canon' originally meant 'measuring reed' but eventually developed the meaning 'standard' or 'rule.' Pertaining to the Bible, the term refers to those books accepted by the church as the standard that governs Christian belief and conduct. The canon of Scripture, therefore, is that list or collection of books which were accepted as an authoritative rule of faith and practice" (Brock).¹ "The canon of the NT was finally settled in the Eastern Church by the middle of the 4th century; in 367, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, listed the twenty-seven books of the NT as we have them today. In the West, a Church council at Carthage in AD 397 agreed on the same list of genuine NT books" (Needham).² Thus, after listing the 27 books of the NT, Athanasius went on to say, "These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these."³

Later in this same letter, Athanasius had this to say about the *apocrypha*: "But the apocryphal writings are an invention of heretics, who write them when they choose, bestowing upon them their approval, and assigning to them a date, that so, using them as ancient writings, they may find occasion to lead astray the simple."⁴ The *apocrypha* refer to 15 books that were added at the end of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew OT). "The Church called these extra books the *apocrypha*, which is Greek for 'hidden things' (this refers to the fact that the apocryphal books were not read out in public worship, because the Church did not consider them to be on the same level as the rest of Scripture)" (Needham).⁵

While the full NT canon was recognized by the fourth century, as early as the apostolic fathers, various lists were suggested. "In the second century, Irenaeus recognized 23 NT books, and at the turn of the third century, Tertullian first referred to the NT writings as a "testament" with 24 books (omitting James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John). Early in the third century, Origen refers to all 27, but notes that six are disputed: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. This situation seems to have persisted until the fourth century" (Klein).⁶ Furthermore, from the beginning, the apostolic fathers distinguished between their writings and Scripture. "For example, Ignatius wrote to the Trallians in the early second century, 'I did not think myself competent for this, that I should order you as though I were an apostle.' A generation or two later Clement quoted Mark 2:17 verbatim, with the introduction 'another Scripture says'" (Klein).⁷

The church never declared certain books from God; they merely recognized what was already apparent. As the early church "inherited a complete OT from the Jews" there was never any real question about

¹ Darrell Bock, *In Defense of the Bible*, 393

² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:407

³ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 4:552

⁴ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 4:552

⁵ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:266

⁶ William Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 61

⁷ William Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 61

that.⁸ Three basic tests were applied to determine whether a book was inspired by God: was the book written by an apostle (or close associate); was it orthodox; and was it widely accepted by the church?

(1) Apostolic authority. "All of the NT writings were believed to have apostolic connections. Though not necessarily written by one of the original 12 apostles, they came from the apostolic age (first century) and could be closely associated with those who were considered apostles (including Paul), or closely associated with Jesus (such as the epistles of his brothers, James and Jude) (Klein).⁹ "The criterion by which the Church judged and accepted a writing as authoritative was its connection with the apostles. If it had been written or dictated by an apostle (Paul, John, Peter, Matthew), or by someone under apostolic direction (Mark, who wrote under Peter's direction, and Luke, who wrote under Paul's), it was regarded as 'Scripture'" (Needham).¹⁰

(2) Orthodoxy. "Early Christians believed that the theology and ethics promoted by the NT books as a whole cohered—a belief not held by most of the Gnostic challengers. To call all the NT writings orthodox does not preclude a wise measure of diversity among them, but it does imply that none of the texts actually contradicts another one" (Klein).¹¹ "Does the content of a particular book under scrutiny agree with the oral apostolic doctrine, i.e., the teaching of the apostles? Does it agree with the doctrine which the apostles themselves taught orally in person when they were alive on the earth" (Bock)?¹²

(3) Catholicity. This means, there had to be wide agreement on the usefulness of a book. "Books were preserved that had proved useful for a large number of churches from the earliest generations of Christianity to the present" (Klein).¹³ "Recognition by the churches was another criterion used by the early church to determine what books were inspired of God. This principle asked whether the book was recognized by a leading church or group of churches. If a book was accepted as authoritative by the churches at Ephesus, Jerusalem, Antioch, Rome, Carthage, and so on, then, due to the influence of these churches, the chances were great that the church as a whole would consider it to be part of the Word of God" (Bock).¹⁴

Now, in regard to the canonical Scriptures, he (i.e., the interpreter) must follow the judgment of the great number of catholic churches; and among these, of course, a high place must be given to such as have been thought worthy to be the seat of an apostle and to receive epistles. Accordingly, among the canonical Scriptures he will judge according to the following standard: to prefer those that are received by all the catholic churches to those which some do not receive. Now the canon of Scripture on which we say this judgment is to be exercised, is contained in the following books—Four books of the Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; fourteen epistles of the Apostle Paul—Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1&2 Thessalonians, Colossians, 1&2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, 1&2 Peter, 1, 2&3 John, Jude, James, Acts, and Revelation.¹⁵

2. *Its relation to tradition.* While the term "canon" became associated with the inspired books of the Bible (as mentioned above), prior to this, the early church applied this term to what they called "the

⁸ William Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 59

⁹ William Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 64-65

¹⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:110-111

¹¹ William Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 65

¹² Darrell Bock, *In Defense of the Bible*, 408

¹³ William Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 65

¹⁴ Darrell Bock, *In Defense of the Bible*, 408

¹⁵ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (Augustine), 2:538-539

rule of faith." "What the apostles had handed down was sometimes known as the 'rule of faith' or the 'canon.'" (Hill).¹⁶ "This referred to the common faith of the church, as orally handed down in the unbroken succession of bishops from Christ and His apostles to their day" (Schaff).¹⁷ "In the earlier Christian centuries this was a summary of Christian teaching, believed to reproduce what the apostles themselves taught, by which any system of doctrine offered for Christian acceptance, or any interpretation of biblical writings, was to be assessed" (Bruce).¹⁸ "The church fathers began to speak of the rule of faith as that body of belief that summarizes the teaching of the Bible and that guards the faith from heretical teachings and perversions" (Calhoun).¹⁹ This rule of faith as it was orally passed down can be found scattered through the writings of the apostolic fathers (Ignatius, Irenaeus and Tertullian), and became the standard or rule whereby doctrine was judged. "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'" (Calhoun).²⁰ "Against the doctrines of the Gnostics, the Church pointed to its *rule of faith*. Each church had its own version of this rule, but they all taught more or less the same thing. The rule of faith was a summary of apostolic teaching (and eventually codified in the Apostles' Creed)" (Needham).²¹

Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and truly died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life.²²

Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen 'in diverse manners' by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; then having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.²³

By the middle of the second century, this was formed into what's called the Apostles' Creed. And this short Creed, then became described as the rule of faith. "In the narrower sense, by apostolic tradition or the rule of faith was understood a doctrinal summary of Christianity, or a summary of the faith of

¹⁶ Jonathan Hill, *History of Christianity*, 68

¹⁷ Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Church*, 2:525

¹⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 18

¹⁹ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 6

²⁰ David Calhoun, *Ancient and Medieval Church History*, Lesson 6

²¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:108-109

²² Ante-Nicene Fathers (Ignatius)1:69

²³ Ante-Nicene Fathers (Tertullian), 3:249

the church. There was at first no prescribed formula of faith binding upon all believers. Each of the leading churches framed its creed. Yet with all the differences in form and extent there was substantial agreement. But then eventually, these summaries were all merged into one, which became and remains to this day the fundamental creed of the Latin Church and her daughters. This Roman symbol is known more particularly under the honored name of the *Apostles' Creed*" (Schaff).²⁴ "The word *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning 'I believe.' A creed is a statement of belief. The Church adopted the Apostles' Creed in order that everybody might know what the Church believed to be true Christian doctrine, in distinction from the false and heretical doctrines of the Gnostics and Montanists" (Kuiper).²⁵

Its (Apostles' Creed) basic text was put together, probably in Rome, around the year 150. It was then called 'symbol of the faith.' The word 'symbol' meant a means of recognition, such as a token that a general gave to a messenger, so that the recipient could recognize a true messenger. Likewise, the 'symbol' put together in Rome was a means whereby Christians could distinguish true believers from those who followed the various heresies circulating at the time. Any who could affirm this creed were orthodox or catholic.²⁶

3. *Its schools of interpretation.* "As the early Church Fathers passed from the scene, two centers of Christian instruction came to dominate biblical interpretation in the Church (some add a third). Though both shared the same basic Christian beliefs, they differed in their approaches to Bible interpretation. Each carried on and refined one of the interpretive approaches received from its intellectual ancestors" (Klein).²⁷

(1) Alexandria. "At the beginning of the third century, biblical interpretation was influenced especially by the school of Alexandria. The chief representatives of this school were Clement of Alexandria (150-215) and his disciple, Origen (185-253). They both regarded the Bible as the inspired Word of God, in the strictest sense, and shared the opinion of the day that special rules had to be applied in the interpretation of divine communications. And while they recognized the literal sense of the Bible, they were of the opinion that only the allegorical interpretation contributed to real knowledge" (Berkhof).²⁸ Origen replaced Clement as bishop in 232, "who raised the school to the summit of its prosperity, and founded a similar one at Caesarea in Palestine" (Schaff).²⁹ Born into a Christian home, his father, who was martyred in 202 when he was 17, "gave him a superb education in both Greek literature and the Scriptures. The latter involved memorization of most of the Greek Bible, which would serve Origen in good stead when he became the foremost biblical exegete of his day" (Haykin).³⁰ In 230, Origen left Alexandria for Caesarea in Palestine as the result of a dispute with his bishop (Demetrius). "In Caesarea, with the ongoing help of Ambrose, he set up a form of a Christian seminary based on communal living" (Haykin).³¹ It would be in Caesarea, Origen would write most of his homilies and commentaries on Biblical books such as Genesis, Psalms, the Song of Songs, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Matthew, Luke, John, and Romans.

²⁴ Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Church*, 2:529

²⁵ B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 53

²⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:63

²⁷ William Klein, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 33

²⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 19-20

²⁹ Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Church*, 2:778-779

³⁰ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 69-70

³¹ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 78

The Alexandrian theology is intellectual, profound, stirring, and full of fruitful germs of thought. In its efforts to reconcile revelation and philosophy it took up, many foreign elements, especially of the Platonic stamp, and wandered into speculative views which a later and more orthodox, but more narrow-minded and less productive age condemned as heresies, not appreciating the immortal service of this school to its own and after times.³²

To rightly understand Origen, we must go back to Philo (20 BC – AD 50) and even Plato (425 BC – 345 BC). Philo was a Greek speaking Jew from Alexandria. He used allegory to harmonize the Jewish Scripture with Greek (Platonic) philosophy. "He adopted the fundamental principle of Plato that one should not believe anything unworthy of God. And whenever he found things in the OT that did not agree with his philosophy and that offended his sense of propriety, he resorted to allegorical interpretations. He did not altogether reject the literal sense of Scripture, but regarded it as a concession to the weak. For him, it was merely a symbol of far deeper things. The hidden meaning of Scripture was the all-important one" (Berkhoff).³³ "Origen also widely practiced this method of exegesis. However, he never uses allegory to the exclusion of other methods. He can use the familiar early Christian argument from prophecy, namely, that various OT texts have a prophetic fulfillment in Christ, and he often merely interpreted historical texts as actual and literal history" (Haykin).³⁴ "Origen regarded the Bible as a means for the salvation of man; and because, according to Plato, man consists of three parts—body, soul, and spirit—he accepted a threefold sense, namely the literal, the moral, and the mystical or allegorical sense" (Berkhof).³⁵ "For this latter sense of Scripture Origen has many names—he calls it the heavenly sense, the intellectual, the mystic, and the hidden. This is what chiefly engages his interest in the work of expounding. Scripture is to him full of mysteries, every jot and tittle has its secret, and to read these heavenly mysteries is the highest object of the interpreter."³⁶ "His great defect is the neglect of the grammatical and historical sense and his constant desire to find a hidden mystic meaning. His allegorical interpretation is clever, but often turns far away from the text and degenerates into the merest fancy" (Schaff).³⁷

In a treatise entitled, *On First Principles*, Origen both defined and defended allegorical interpretation. He first mentions the erroneous views of "Jewish literalism." "This refers to rabbinic Judaism and its claim that it alone can properly interpret the OT" (Haykin).³⁸ "These fail to understand the spiritual sense of Scripture, because it's interpreted according to the bare letter" (Origen).³⁹ He then provides several arguments in defense of allegorical interpretations. "First of all, he appeals to the example of Paul as found in 1 Corinthians 10:4, Galatians 4:21-24, and Ephesians 5:31-32. For Origen, therefore, his allegorizing has distinct biblical precedent" (Haykin).⁴⁰ He then shows, many Scriptures cannot be interpreted literally, such as prophecy, types, and metaphors. Because these have a hidden or deeper meaning, Origen sought to find a hidden or deeper meaning in most Scripture. "Origen believed that there was much in Scriptures that lay beyond the capacity of the ordinary mind, and that the highest way of treating Scripture was not that of practical application, but that of searching after its hidden sense."⁴¹

³² Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Church*, 2:780

³³ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 16

³⁴ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 82

³⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 20

³⁶ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 9:292

³⁷ Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Church*, 2:792

³⁸ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 88

³⁹ Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.2

⁴⁰ Michael Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers*, 88

⁴¹ Ante-Nicene Fathers, 9:292

One must portray the meaning of sacred writings in a threefold way upon one's own soul, so that the simple man may be edified by what we may call the flesh of the Scripture, this name being given to the obvious interpretation; while you who have made progress may be edified by its soul, as it were; and the man who is perfect or mature—this man may be edified by the spiritual law, which has 'a shadow of the good things to come.' For just as a man consists of body, soul, and spirit, so in the same way does the Scripture, which has been prepared by God to be given for man's salvation.⁴²

In his book, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, Bryan Litfin, agrees there were problems in Origen's threefold interpretation. And yet, he suggested Origen had three safeguards in place to deal with the problem of the interpreter's subjectivity.⁴³ First, "Origen fully embraced the catholic church's Rule of Faith as a theological guide. Although he believed he had great freedom in how to handle a biblical text, Origen didn't grant himself license to come up with any interpretation whatsoever. An interpreter's conclusions had to be congruent with what the Christian church believed and taught." Second, "Origen understood the Bible was, at its heart, a message about the Logos who became incarnate as Jesus Christ. But it was more than that. Not only was it *about* Him, it was also *from* Him." Third, "Origen understood the importance of the upright character of the exegete. He always insisted that gaining insight into the deepest meaning of Scripture required moral excellence. Interpretation in the ancient church was a spiritual quest—indeed, a life's calling—so everything depended on your heart for the Lord. Godliness, not just a good mind, was required for true comprehension. The lifestyle of the interpreter genuinely mattered."

(2) Antioch. "The founders of this school are Diodorus (330-394) and Theodorus (350-428), both formerly presbyters of Antioch. The characteristic features are a close adherence to the plain, natural meaning according to the use of language. In other words, its exegesis is grammatical and historical, in distinction from the allegorical method of the Alexandrian School" (Schaff).⁴⁴ "John Chrysostom was the best representative of this school. The Cappadocian fathers also belonged to this school" (Borgman).⁴⁵ "Origen remained the exegetical oracle until Chrysostom far surpassed him, not indeed in originality and vigor of mind and extend of learning, but in sound, sober tact, in simple, natural analysis, and in practical application of the text" (Schaff).⁴⁶

(3) Carthage. "A mediating type of exegesis made its appearance in the West. It harbored some elements of the allegorical school of Alexandria, but also recognized some of the principles of the Syrian school. Its most characteristic feature is found in the fact that it advanced another element, which had not asserted itself up to that time, namely, the authority of tradition and of the Church in the interpretation of the Bible" (Berkhof).⁴⁷ Men from this school were Ambrose (339-397), Jerome (342-420), and Augustine (354-430). "These men stressed the necessity of having regard for the literal sense, and of basing the allegorical upon it; but, at the same time, they indulged rather freely in allegorical interpretation. Moreover, in cases where the sense of Scripture was doubtful, they gave a deciding voice to the faith (understanding) of the Church" (Berkhof).⁴⁸

⁴² Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.4

⁴³ Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 129-132

⁴⁴ Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Church*, 2:815-816

⁴⁵ Brian Borgman, unpublished lectures on Church History

⁴⁶ Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Church*, 2:792

⁴⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 21-22

⁴⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 22