

The Rule of Faith

Remember: The Challenge of Heresies

- Though different in their details, the heresies were united in the challenge they put to the early church: Who or what has the authority to define the boundaries of true gospel faith for the Christian church?
- The church's response was threefold: 1) Canon, 2) Creed, and 3) Episcopacy.¹

Review: The Canon of the New Testament

- The “canon of Scripture” means “the *list* of books which are acknowledged to be, in a unique sense, the *rule* of belief and practice.”²
- The 27 books in our New Testament were not at first recognized as a single collection, but as authoritative subcollections: the Gospels, Acts, the Letters of Paul, the General Epistles, and Revelation.
- The core of the NT canon (Gospels, Acts, Paul) was established by the end of the 2nd century. Agreement on the General Epistles (James-Jude) and Revelation was less rapid and uniform.
- Before the Council of Nicaea convened in 325, Eusebius published his *Ecclesiastical History*, in which he lists all 27 of our New Testament books as either “accepted” or “disputed.” The 1st list to speak of these 27 books as a fixed canon is the 39th “Festal Letter” of Athanasius, published in 367.
- Although not as tidy as we might like, the great point is this: in an age without instant communication, the Holy Spirit guided the church – spread across a vast spread of lands, cultures, tribes, and tongues – to a remarkable unity on the books in which they heard the voice of our Savior (Jn. 10.27, 16.13).

The “Rule of Faith”

- Alongside of the process of settling the canon of the New Testament, the church also developed written summaries of the gospel – statements of the “rule of faith,” “rule of truth,” etc.
- This process unfolded organically, beginning with informal and widespread seeds that grew into two distinct but related fruits: 1) fixed “confessions” of faith recited by adult converts at their baptism, and 2) the great “creeds” officially composed, adopted, recognized, and utilized by the whole church.
- Whether informal, confessional, or creedal, the “rule of faith” became a central and useful tool for the ancient church – and retains the same usefulness today.

Defining “The Rule of Faith”

- In his last surviving letter, the apostle Paul instructs Timothy to “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus,” (2 Tim. 1.13). Note 3 things:
 - Christians need to know and follow not just the words of God, but “the pattern of the sound words.”
 - This pattern was received from the apostles: “the pattern... you have heard from me...”
 - This pattern summarizes the gospel: “...the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”
- We can get some idea of what Paul meant from 1 Corinthians 15.1-9, where he reminds the church “of the gospel I preached to you,” the matters “of first importance.”
- “From very early on there was a widely shared consensus... as to the basic shape of the church’s proclamation... And this core, this heart, was summed up in the rule of faith.”³
- This rule was not a rival to the Bible, but rather a gospel summary gleaned from the Bible itself:
 - “These things are such as fall [plainly] under our observation, and are clearly and unambiguously in express terms set forth in the Sacred Scriptures.” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.27.1)
 - “The rule of faith... is gathered from the plain passages of Scripture and from the authority of the church.” (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 3.2)

¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, revised ed., vol. 1. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 75-81.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 17-18.

³ Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 2.

Early Examples of the Rule

- One of the earliest examples of the Rule is found in the writings of Irenaeus around 180-190:
For the church, although dispersed throughout the whole world, as far as the ends of the earth, received from the apostles and their disciples, the faith in one God the Father Almighty, who has made the heaven, the earth, the seas, and all things in them; and in one Christ Jesus the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who has proclaimed through the prophets the plans of God and the comings of Christ, both the birth from the virgin, the passion, the rising from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus our Lord, and his coming [again] from heaven in the glory of the Father for the summing up of all things and the raising of all humanity... that he might make a just judgment on all, that he might send the spiritual hosts of wickedness, the angels who transgressed and went into apostasy, and the impious, unjust, lawless, and blasphemers among human beings into the eternal fire; but might grant incorruptible life and eternal glory to those who are righteous, holy, and keep his commandments, and who persevere in his love either from the beginning or by repentance, and surround them with eternal glory. (*Against Heresies* 1.10.1)
- Another useful example comes from the writings of Tertullian around 196-212:
The rule of faith... is that of believing in the one almighty God, the Founder of the universe, and in his Son Jesus Christ, born from the virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, raised from the dead on the third day, received into the heavens, sitting now at the right [hand] of the Father, going to come to judge the living and the dead through the resurrection of the flesh. . . . This law of faith is constant. (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 1.3-4)
- From these examples, what seem to be the core features of the gospel as the church understood it?

The Role of the Rule in the Life of the Church⁴

- *Instruction of New Converts / Baptismal Creed*
 - Irenaeus wrote that believers “received the rule of truth through baptism” (*Against Heresies* 1.9.4).
 - Forms of the Rule were confessed by adult converts when they came for baptism (*see below*).
- *Interpretation of Scripture*
 - “The rule of faith provides... a metanarrative, so individual passages are to be approached in the light of the whole story. Since there is a unity in the narrative, Scripture interprets Scripture. This narrative is Christ-centered. The rule establishes a framework with boundaries for interpretation of Scripture.” (61)
 - The Rule functioned both positively (clarifying difficulties) and negatively (excluding errors).
- *A Standard for Doctrine / Refutation of Heresy*
 - Containing the settled, biblical conclusions of the church regarding the gospel, the Rule defined clear boundaries – within which there could be disagreement, but beyond which was heresy.
- In which of these ways can the “rule of faith” still help the church today?

The Great Rules of the Truth: The Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed

- The *Apostles’ Creed* got its name from a legend that each of the twelve apostles contributed a piece. In reality, it seems to have grown out of an ancient⁵ baptismal creed from the church in Rome:
I believe in God the Father Almighty. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was born by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary; was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven; and sits on the right hand of the Father; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Church; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body.
- The *Nicene Creed*, first authored at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and then republished at the Council of Constantinople in 381, had its origins in the necessity of refuting Arianism.
- After its publication, the *Nicene Creed* became the dominant and most popular creed in the global church. The *Apostles’ Creed* did not make a comeback until the 9th century, when the pope revived it in an effort to avoid conflict between Charlemagne and the Eastern Emperor. After the Eastern and Western churches divided in 1054, the *Apostles’ Creed* became the most popular creed in the West.⁶

⁴ Insights under this section summarized or quoted from Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith*, 60-90.

⁵ This creed may have roots as early as the middle of the 2nd century. See Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, 77

⁶ For the full story, see Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, 312.