

CANON AND CREED

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY – FALL 2023

CANON – *the list of Bible books accepted by the church as authentic*

HOW DID WE GET THE CANON?

- The four Gospels were widely circulated and accepted very early
- The letters of Paul were circulating in collections by the end of the 1st century
- Debates about the canon started early in the 2nd century
- The earliest complete list was the Muratorian Canon from 170AD and it includes most of the books we now use
- By the mid-3rd century, most Christians recognized the 27 books we use today as authentic
- The most debated books were: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Revelation
- Earliest known list of final canonical books – Athanasius (367)
- Three Councils established the canon: Hippo (393), Carthage (397), Carthage (413)

HOW DID THEY DECIDE WHICH BOOKS TO INCLUDE?

- Apostolic Authorship – written by apostles or known close associates
- Orthodoxy – consistent with good doctrine
- Widespread Use – accepted by most Christians as authentic
- Other factors: textual quality, historical accuracy, and spiritual value

Augustine: “I confess that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it. As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason. I believe, my brother, that this is your own opinion as well as mine. I do not need to say that I do not suppose you to wish your books to be read like those of prophets or of apostles, concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error.”

- Letter to Jerome, 405AD

HOW DO WE KNOW THEY GOT IT RIGHT?

- We trust that God used this process to preserve the books He wants the Church to read.

CREED – a formal statement of Christian beliefs

WHY DID THE EARLY CHURCH USE CREEDS?

- To teach and summarize important beliefs
- To fight false teaching
- As public professions of faith before baptism and during worship

WHERE DID THE APOSTLE'S CREED COME FROM?

- Creedal passages are common in Paul's letters (1 Cor 15:3-7; Col 1:15-20; 1 Tim 3:16)
- Earliest known version is the Muratorian Creed (170)
- The form we use today was probably written in the mid 3rd century
- It was likely used as a baptismal creed.
- It is still being used today by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches.

WHAT ABOUT THE NICENE CREED?

- Includes more doctrine than the Apostle's Creed
- Was written to correct the Arian heresy
- First approved by the Council of Nicaea in 325
- Edited by the Council of Constantinople in 381 (this is the version used today)
- This is the only statement of faith officially approved by ALL major branches of the Church

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you think of any possible reasons why God used the canonization process?
2. Do you think the early church creeds are still useful today? Why or why not?