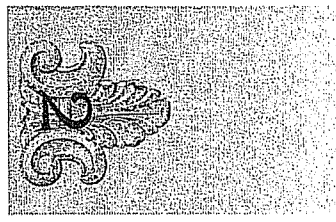


This is the catholic church, strongly and widely spread throughout the world, making use of all who are in error in order to correct them if they are willing to be awakened, which is a way of assisting the church's own progress. It makes use of the nations as material for its own operations; of heretics as a means of testing its own teaching; of schismatics to prove its own stability. . . . Some it invites, others it excludes, some it leaves behind, others it leads. To all it gives the power to participate in the grace of God.<sup>37</sup>

The *catholica* is the teaching of the New Testament and the early fathers that is common to churches that profess the historic Christian faith. It is the guarantee that God loves and saves us and tells us about himself.



## THE EARLY CHURCH AS CANONICAL

In accordance with the apostolic faith delivered to us by tradition from the Fathers, I have delivered that tradition without inventing anything extraneous to it. What I have learned, that is what I have written down, in conformity with the Holy Scriptures.

Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter to Serapion*

**N**OT ALL TRADITION is equal. For almost two millennia, the church's tradition has provided Christians with the essential baseline of theological faithfulness. But it has not always been clear which elements of the tradition should serve as ongoing standards for Christianity and which are denominationally or culturally specific. Since the sixteenth century, one of the persistent conflicts among Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Greek Orthodox has involved how one should discern which aspects of traditions are normative and which are not.

Constructive and interchurch dialogue on the matter of tradition was not taken up until the Faith and Order conferences (of

37. Augustine, *On True Religion* vi, 10.

the World Council of Churches) held at Lund, Sweden (1952), and Montreal (1963). A report from Lund proposed "further ecumenical discussion to be found in that common history we have as Christians and which we have discovered to be longer, larger, and richer than any of our separate histories in our divided churches."<sup>1</sup> The studies produced at Montreal permanently altered the way in which modern theology thought about tradition. Especially important at this conference was that Eastern Orthodoxy was central to the discussions and helped broaden the concept of tradition in fruitful ways. A threefold way of clarifying tradition was proposed at Montreal: (1) "Tradition" chiefly refers to the activity of tradition (the dynamic of traditioning) by which a specific content of faith is transmitted; (2) "traditions" denotes the diversity of concrete manifestations of the traditioning process, namely, the various church affiliations or denominations; and (3) "the Tradition" is the common life of the church that has its source in God's act of revelation in Jesus Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit in his people, and his work in their history. The rationale for positing "the Tradition" was that the plurality of traditions presupposes a kind of identity and continuity that links them together. All major Christian traditions must "point beyond themselves to a common source and head."<sup>2</sup>

I too have followed a similar path of distinguishing *the tradition* from traditions along the lines just described.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in the preface of this book, friendly critics of my previous work on tradition commented on how I attributed tradition chiefly to the patristic period. My way of seemingly limiting the meaning of the term has been viewed as problematic. Surely if tradition is an active and progressive movement within the life of the church, we should be able to talk about how tradition is articulated and shaped in each age. As a living entity, the tradition acts as a creative force within the Christian faith, which means it is subject to

1. *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order* (London: SCM, 1952), 27. Cf. K. E. Skjoldsgaard, "Tradition as an Issue in Contemporary Theology," in *The Old and the New in the Church*, World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961).

2. "The Report of the Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions," *Faith and Order Paper*, no. 40 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1963), 17-18.

3. D. H. Williams, "Reflections on Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Response," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 105-12.

expansion and reform in its development. My Roman Catholic brethren are especially keen to insist on the ability of tradition to speak to each new generation and to be reinterpreted for the needs of the church in every age.<sup>4</sup> This is a valid and fruitful way to think of tradition, the utility of which I have acknowledged.

The Montreal definition, however, is seeking an even broader definition, equating the tradition with the whole history of salvation, God's message of redemption transmitted across the ages in and by the church.<sup>5</sup> The problem with the Montreal definition is that it ultimately suffers from the Platonic syndrome. The tradition becomes a kind of idealized form of every but no one tradition, a suprahistorical vision of the church's life through time with no concrete connection to time. It has an unmistakable appeal to content,<sup>6</sup> distinguishing it from the act of tradition but without providing incarnate standards of content. The tradition is not merely an essential "act" throughout historical times. It possesses a content in particular times that can be grasped utterly, though not entirely, in earthly terms and contexts.

Comprising a dynamic character in history, the tradition is not limited by any one culture, generation, language, etc. This is what some modern theologians mean by the phrase "the great tradition," a trajectory of doctrinal faithfulness that has been uncovered in the course of the patristic, medieval, and Reformation periods. After all, Protestants want to defend the influx of traditions lately brought into church history by Protestantism such as *sola fide*, the egalitarian priesthood of all believers, and ecclesial voluntarism. Should there not always be room for the

4. See *Dei Verbum*, II.8-10, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. Abbott (New York: Association Press, 1966), 115-18. The Vatican is committed to a progressive view of tradition in support of its view of the ongoing revelatory nature of tradition. The prospect of new revelation is denied explicitly in both the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" and the "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation." These statements notwithstanding, article 8 seems to suggest the possibility of hitherto undisclosed public revelations being discovered. A good critique is found in E. G. Hinson, "The Authority of Tradition: A Baptist View," in *The Free Church and the Early Church: Essays in Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide*, ed. D. H. Williams, 141-61 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

5. P. C. Rodger and I. Vischer, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 50.

6. E.g., "all the manifold traditions of the past and present are under the judgment of the Tradition" ("Report of the Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions," 18).

correction of traditions or new understandings of the gospel to be incorporated into the tradition?

At the same time, the incorporation of subsequent traditions or the reform of tradition has come about on the basis of an appeal to an earlier, foundational tradition that has operated as the norm. Faithfulness in the development of tradition is the degree to which the latter stands in relation to the primordial deposit of tradition. Protestants would therefore agree that not all dogmatic declarations should be regarded as tradition, such as the doctrine of papal infallibility or Mary's bodily ascension to heaven. All earthly traditions can claim to be genuine forms of the Christian faith only to the extent that they mirror in a consensual way *the* tradition.

Thus, I wish to designate the tradition in a manner more circumscribed than the Montreal statement, applicable chiefly to the apostolic and patristic faith. The basis of all tradition that originated in the apostolic and postapostolic centuries offers not a uniform or purist picture of the church but the theological and confessional building blocks on which ensuing Christian thought, practice, worship, and so on have been built. The tradition may not be reduced to the early church, but it certainly includes it and is largely defined by it. As such, the tradition is the various incarnations of the Christian faith articulated during the first five or six centuries.<sup>7</sup> In real and tangible ways, this period has functioned like a "canon" of Christian theology (doctrine, liturgy, prayer, exegesis, etc.) and has been the basis for directing the subsequent course of theology. In other words, the apostolic and patristic tradition is foundational to the Christian faith in *normative* ways that no other period of the church's history can claim. A theologian or pastor may agree or disagree

7. Scholars place the end of the patristic era between the fifth century and the seventh century. There is no agreement on this because no one definitive event or author marks the end. The best way to indicate the close of the "age of the fathers" is when writers begin to look backward in time for religious authority rather than to the present when it comes to validating their arguments. While the ancient Christians always regarded the past with high esteem, one can point to an increasing number of instances in the late fifth and six centuries when writers thought of the earlier fathers as privileged witnesses to Christian truth. This is, like all alternatives, quite subjective, and exceptions to it can be found. It does more justice, however, to the nuances required for the various factors of historical interpretation. See Patrick Gray, "The Select Fathers: Canonizing the Patristic Past," *Studia Patristica* 23 (1989): 21-36.

with the patristic legacy, but it is functioning nonetheless as a rule by which such agreement or disagreement occurs. Even from a postmodern orientation, which refuses to identify with any standard of faith as an enduring standard, all theologizing is still done using a terminology and a conceptuality that are beholden to established norms of the Christian past and shape the direction of the future.<sup>8</sup>

The above "canonical" understanding of the tradition does not violate the continuing character of traditions within the body of Christ, although this way of describing the tradition is privileging the earliest stages of tradition (apostolic and patristic) over all later forms. As stated at the outset of this chapter, not all tradition is equal. With that in mind, it should also be said that the tradition in its apostolic phase, developing under the active influence of the Lord and the apostles under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, has priority over the manifestations of the tradition in the patristic church. For this reason, Scripture possesses a normativity that is superior to the tradition. But it is no less true that the church of Christ has always depended on the way in which the former has been mediated through the latter.

The most familiar example of the patristic age as canon is how the Apostles' and Nicene creeds have remained theological and ecclesiastical guideposts for signaling the way of orthodoxy for the Christian faith. Even for those church communions that do not regularly profess these creeds or acknowledge them in worship, the faith of these churches is dependent upon the theology that the major creeds represent. By and large, nearly every evangelical and free church congregation is taught theology consistent with or approximate to a Nicene trinitarianism and a Chalcedonian Christology. The raw material for such teaching may be from the New Testament, but the doctrines are patristic. Of course, the patristic canon is not able to comprehend the whole of the Christian faith—it never could—but it does present fundamentally and definitively what constitutes the "Christian" of the Christian faith.

8. See Lieven Boeve, *The Interruption of Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

Applying the vocabulary of "canon" and "canonical" to the apostolic and patristic theological tradition may raise the eyebrows of some readers. My intent in doing so is not to be provocative by taking a controversial approach to the subject. By signaling the normative status of the patristic tradition, I am seeking to do several things at once. First, I want to emphasize the indissoluble connection that existed between the apostolic and the patristic church. The two should indeed be distinguished, the apostolic representing the voices of those who were the first disciples and hearers of the Lord. But far too often we take the artificial boundaries established in textbooks for purposes of clarifying the stages in church history as real divisions. Calling the time of the apostles "apostolic" and what followed "catholic" has served not only to distinguish the latter period as postapostolic but also to depict it as a series of developments not in keeping with the original apostolic charter. As the influential church historian Adolf von Harnack of the last century would have it, the apostolic reliance on the gifts and freedom of the Spirit was transformed into the fixing of tradition and doctrinal content known as "catholicism," in which a "canon of faith" eclipsed the spiritual simplicity of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> But it is one thing to observe changes of development and quite another to create a disjunction. One can point to a formation of doctrinal tradition in the earliest apostolic writings and dependency upon the Spirit's leading in later patristic texts. A strict delineation between the apostolic and the patristic is no more than a theoretical construct that fails at integrating the historical evidence. The manual of Christian practice and worship known as the *Didache* originated in the area of northern Syria, as did the Gospel of Matthew, and was produced within a generation or less of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> *First Clement* was written, just like Revelation, in the mid 90s of the first century. Yet one was eventually regarded as apostolic and the other patristic. The

9. Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 2, trans. N. Buchanan (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 25.

10. Matthew's Gospel is closely associated with Antioch, whereas the *Didache*, at least in its final form, seems to come from a more rural area of Syria. See R. E. Brown and J. P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 81-84.

reasons for this distinction are not always apparent, underscored by the evidence that *I Clement* and the *Didache* were regarded as Scripture (as were some other patristic works) by certain churches. The distinctions we so readily make today between apostolic and patristic were not clear to the Christians who were living in those times.

Second, advocating the normativity of the patristic faith in addition to the apostolic is merely giving voice to the theological and historical ramifications that have already been operating for over a millennium. Again, it may be that many Protestant and evangelical churches have rarely or never expressed the rudiments of this tradition in a formal manner (i.e., in worship), though they often exhibit a knowledge, however oblique, of the inheritance of the early church. However, the appropriation of the patristic legacy is nowhere more evident than in the Christian canonical collection known as the New Testament. The scope and extent of the Bible were realized by the patristic church, which discerned what was Scripture according to criteria of apostolicity, inspiration, and so on. Even the theological concept of apostolicity was not fashioned into a principle of authority until the mid-second century. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna who laid down his life for the Christian witness, is called in the account of his martyrdom "an apostolic and prophetic teacher." He had always preserved and transmitted faithfully the teaching given to him by the apostles.<sup>11</sup> That which is apostolic, or apostolicity, was a developed idea mainly pertaining to the conservation and continuation of what the apostles taught.<sup>12</sup> With good reason did George Florovsky declare, "The Church is apostolic indeed, but the Church is also patristic,"<sup>13</sup> that is, faithfulness to the gospel was first defined and lived out by those we call the fathers of the church.

11. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 16.2; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* III.3, 4.

12. The word *apostolic* is first used in Ignatius of Antioch's preface to his letter to the Trallians (c. 117) in reference to the imitation of a personal model, but Irenaeus provides us with what would become the standard understanding: "The church . . . has received from the Apostles and their disciples the faith." He then proceeds to give a summary of that faith (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.10).

13. George Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1972), 107.

Before we go any further, more qualification is in order. Let me reiterate that "canon" is any mechanism for standardizing a measurement or an evaluation. Speaking figuratively in a Christian context, the canon is a fixed norm or rule for determining the parameters of Christian thought and life. It has nothing necessarily to do with a list(s) of texts. Even if we were talking about texts, a given writing may be regarded as authoritative, even inspired, but it may not (or not yet) belong to an authoritative body of literature considered canonical. Examples of this from the first- and second-century corpus known as the Apostolic Fathers have been well documented.<sup>14</sup> Within the New Testament itself, one can point to the prophecy of Enoch in Jude 14. It is apparent that the writer of Jude is using *1 Enoch* (60:8), an off-used Jewish apocalyptic text, as an inspired text, introducing it by the term *prophesied*. Many Jews and Christian Jews considered the text of *1* and *2 Enoch* "God-breathed" (i.e., inspired). Modern Christian readers may be disturbed by such a citation if they assume that inspiration was equivalent to canonicity at this early date.

The more familiar meaning of "canon" refers to a fixing of authoritative religious texts into a standardized body. Yet we must recognize that both narratives and texts were often acknowledged as authoritative within Christian churches long before they were placed, if at all, into fixed and standardized formats.<sup>15</sup> The book of Eldad and Modat, an otherwise unknown Jewish apocalyptic text (whose name seems to be taken from Num. 11:26-27), is quoted by the *Shepherd of Hermas* with the introductory words "it is written,"<sup>16</sup> yet the book does not appear in any early collection of canonical writings. Interestingly, the *Shepherd*, also an apocalyptic text from the early second century, became popular in

14. *The Epistle of Barnabas* begins a quotation from *2 Enoch* (89:5) with "the Scripture says" (16:5); *2 Clement* (11:2) cites *1 Clement* 23.3 with the words, "For the prophetic word also says."

15. A readable presentation of the nuances within the word *canon* are found in Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995). He utilizes Gerald Sheppard's dual distinction of "canon I" and "canon II." The first refers to a rule or standard that is followed whether in oral or written form, whereas "canon II" designates a collection of writings that are permanently fixed.

16. *Shepherd, Vision* 2.7, 4. Two other possible references to the same work are from *1 Clement* 23.3 and *2 Clement* 11.

certain Christian circles and was listed as Scripture in the preeminent biblical codex Sinaiticus (from the fourth century).<sup>17</sup> Rather like today, apocalyptic reading had a wide appeal. The *Shepherd*, therefore, despite its questionable doctrine, was regarded as an authoritative and inspired text for several centuries. Despite all this, the *Shepherd* was not ultimately regarded as canonical.

Of course, the term *canon* is most used for those books of Scripture that the church has recognized to be divinely inspired and therefore authoritative for Christian faith and practice. When students of theology or divinity hear of the "canon," they are taught to think of the biblical texts. What is not so commonly understood is that, while the New Testament was written by apostles and the earliest followers of Christ in the first century, its formation into a concrete and recognized collection, along with the Old Testament,<sup>18</sup> was a uniquely patristic accomplishment. That is, the means by which the biblical books were regarded as inspired and divinely given for Christian doctrine and practice took place in the postapostolic centuries of the early church. This process was a gradual and untidy one that emerged out of the worship and liturgical practices of the early churches. But just as importantly, it should be understood that the very concept of "canon" was first applied to the church's profession of faith, not to a list of authoritative texts. What the church *believed* was canonical long before that belief took written, codified forms. In fact, the earliest canons or norms of the preaching and defending of the early tradition served as the standard for the canonization of texts. Handbooks on the canonization of Scripture usually refer to this feature as the characteristic of apostolicity or orthodoxy and place it among the criteria of how books of the Bible became regarded as canonical.<sup>19</sup> While more than one principle was at work in the canonization process, the resemblance of a book's theological

17. Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen all cite the *Shepherd* as authoritative.

18. Not until the end of the second century was the phrase "Old Testament" used as a way of distinguishing it from the "gospel and apostle." The earliest known usage is in the *Book of Extracts of Melito of Sardis*, a document quoted by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Ecclesiastical History* IV.26.12) and known only in fragmentary form. There was no firm agreement on the parameters of the content of the old covenant and even less regarding what would become the New Testament.

19. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988); and McDonald, *Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon*, 229-36.



content to the church's canon of faith was undoubtedly more important than any other factor. The *Shepherd of Hermas* eventually disappeared from scriptural canonical collections because it was too far removed from the essential points of the tradition.

Thus, the faith articulated during the first five centuries set in place two pillars of authority on which Christians have stood: (1) an apostolic canon of Scripture (the Bible) and (2) a theological canon of apostolicity (cardinal doctrines and confessions of the Trinity, Christology, etc.). The first has to do with the process of codifying the collection of the New Testament, which stands alongside the Old Testament. In other words, gospel and apostle are never supposed to function severed from the prophets. Jesus' words to the disciples along the Emmaus road in Luke 24 served as the archetype for this axiom. The second, a theological canon of apostolicity refers to the forms in which the early church laid down the baseline of essential Christian truths: confessions, creeds, doctrines, interpretations of the Bible, hymns, and so on. Scripture, as the written and fixed authority, became the "primary canon" or what some scholars have called the formal canon, while the tradition, or the "functional canon," is the guide or rule possessing fixed and fluid forms that are both oral and written. Although the New Testament, along with the Old Testament, became the *norma normans* (the norm that sets the norm), the historical fact of the matter is that the apostolic tradition is as primitive as the Christian Scripture. The scriptural canon came about in its shape and content as an embodiment of the canonical tradition, and the tradition could only be legitimated by standing in unity with the teaching of Scripture.

Does the above mean that Scripture is subservient to tradition? The very wording of this question is built on a polemical assumption that Scripture and tradition must lie in antithesis to each other. This is a particularly Protestant worry, one that has influenced and shaped post-sixteenth-century theology to a wide and unfortunate extent. Early Christians would have been baffled by framing Scripture and tradition in this way. The ancient fathers themselves taught that the tradition was the epitome of the Christian faith, the very purport of Scripture. A true interpretation of Scripture would always lead one to the tradition. At the same time, all the major creeds and works of theology acknowl-

edged, implicitly or explicitly, the supremacy of the Bible. The early church held Scripture so highly that in times of persecution Christian leaders were held liable for handing over any texts they possessed. As shown in the decisions of the Western Council of Arles (A.D. 314),<sup>20</sup> any clergyman who surrendered the Scripture to the Roman authorities was removed from his position.

In the Protestant mind, the difference between Scripture and tradition is that the revelation of Scripture has ceased completely, and therefore, the Bible is absolutely unique as canon, whereas tradition is not inspired and has not ceased, making it (perhaps) authoritative but not canonical. The problem with this assessment is that it is limited to a narrow view of what the tradition was and is. The church of Jesus Christ has always looked to certain foundational and formative rules or normative expressions of its teaching about God, Christ, salvation, and the world that are found in the patristic tradition. Practically speaking, this tradition has functioned as a canon of Christian belief, especially as the doctrinal and confessional achievement of the fourth and fifth centuries, operating as the historico-theological precedent for all subsequent formulation. Nothing about the patristic process of canonization should be perceived as a threat to the unique place of Scripture's authority. Historical analyses of the ancient Christian concepts of canon show that the canonization of Scripture occurred within the context of canonical tradition and that both emerged out of the life of the patristic church. Both occurred by the enabling of the Holy Spirit, who nurtured and preserved the church. In this regard, let me cite the Montreal Statement one more time: "We exist as Christians by the Tradition of the gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the church through the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>21</sup> Evangelicals need to hear that not only Scripture but also the tradition was superintended by the work of God's Spirit. God's sovereign purposes were at work in the formation and preservation of the church's structures of belief. Believers are thereby called on to receive this gift as an indelible part of their earthly pilgrimage.

20. *Canon 14* (13).

21. Rodger and Vischer, *Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, 52.

## Locating the First "Canon"

The language and concept of canon preceded Christianity's use of it. Without delving into the subject in any depth, we may observe that the term *canon* had a variety of usages in classical antiquity. Literally, the word meant a plumb line or a stick for making measurements. The figurative meaning was more common. A canon was a model or principle by which all other things were judged. Thus, the canon became the norm in a Platonic sense, whether as the perfect form (e.g., the sculpture of the spearman Polykletus, which was the canonical form for the human body)<sup>22</sup> or as an infallible criterion (e.g., principles of logic by which one is able to know what is true or false).<sup>23</sup> It is with the ancient Greek usage in mind that *canon* first appears within a Christian context. In Galatians 6:15, the apostle Paul closes his letter to the Galatians by reminding them that when it comes to the cross of Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. What matters is how Jews and Gentiles can be made a "new creation" according to the redemption that comes through Christ. Rather than measuring oneself by the law of circumcision, Paul says, peace and mercy are upon those who follow "this canon."<sup>24</sup> The mention of canon here has nothing to do with a list of authoritative texts; rather, it refers to a standard or rule of belief and living grounded in the redemptive death of Christ. An earlier reference to this same canon may be alluded to in chapter 2 when Paul complains about those Jews at Antioch who separated themselves from the Gentiles and thus were not acting in line "with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14).

While this may be the only time Paul actually speaks of a canon, he makes insinuations elsewhere of an existing standard of faith that correlates with his message of the Christian faith. Best known is Paul's outlined version of the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4:

22. Piny the Elder, *Natural History* 34.8, 55.

23. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. G. W. Bromley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 3:597-98. Epicturus is said to have written a book (now lost) titled *The Criterion of the Canon*, in which he used principles of logic to assess points of value, coherence, and so on in an argument.

24. The NIV translates the word *canon* as "rule."

that Christ died for our sins  
that he was buried  
that he was raised on the third day

Paul says this threefold litany of events happened in accordance with the ancient prophets and was witnessed by the apostles. This is not the only record of the Pauline style of presenting the gospel. In the course of his first journey to Asia Minor with Barnabas, "the message of salvation" is reported as the execution of Jesus by the order of Pilate, his body being laid in a tomb, and God raising him from the dead (Acts 13:26-35). These events happened in fulfillment of what God promised "our fathers," just as these were witnessed by those who were with Jesus. Second Timothy 1:13-14 may be an oblique reference to this preaching, though without describing its content: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching; with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you." This "pattern of sound teaching" was by no means something Paul dreamed up on his own recognition. Paul says that as he received it (1 Cor. 11:23; Gal. 1:18), so the Thessalonians, for their sanctification, are to follow the pattern of what they "received" from Paul (1 Thess. 4:1-3). But this pattern was not the only one in use at the time. The christological hymn of Philippians 2:5-11, which recounts the incarnation, crucifixion, and exaltation, echoes a slightly different and probably more common version of the church's proclamation. Here Paul is utilizing a preexisting hymn or liturgical fragment that outlines the salient features of the tradition for mnemonic purposes. Peter's evangelical message in Acts 2:22-36; 3:13-22; and 10:39-43 seems to be constructed upon a similar plan, making the following points: Jesus Christ was killed, raised from the dead, and exalted as Lord and Judge. Again, this preaching of Jesus is affirmed by the Hebrew Scriptures and is the joint witness of the earliest disciples.

In all the above cases, the reader ought to bear in mind that these are reports about the transmission of the faith *before* it was rendered into text (i.e., a letter or narrative) and certainly well before there was any kind of codification of Christian texts. Although the earliest stages of the apostolic message do not contain a single structure or content, one does find a set of recurring

themes that are based on the revelation of God in Christ as seen through his incarnate life; his servanthood through his crucifixion, death, and burial; and the remaking of creation through his resurrection and realized lordship. There was indeed a sense of canonical teaching, as the above passages show, that had to do with standard features of the apostles' preaching. There was also an initial arrangement for devotional and worshiping practices in the life of the church, as Acts 2:42 implies: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

**Patristic Tradition as Canon**

The fathers of the earliest centuries can be considered authors and exponents of a "founding" tradition, which has been preserved and continuously elucidated in subsequent ages. Protestants may insist that tradition is not revelation, yet they might agree that the early tradition was and is an element of the Spirit's providential working to define and preserve the church. Even as the Spirit continues to incorporate new expressions of the church's faith, hope, and love into the body of Christ, it does so always under the guidance of Scripture and in "conversation" with the patristic tradition. We may not be familiar with patristic terminology or we may object to the fathers' use of Platonist or Stoic categories, but the patristic tradition became an indelible part of the Christian faith on which all theology, spirituality, and exegesis have been built. The place of the patristic tradition, as manifested in the content of its creeds, catechisms, and doctrinal and moral theology, has functioned and still functions in a canonical way, theologically and historically. Practically speaking, this tradition has functioned as a canon of Christian belief, especially the doctrinal and confessional achievement of the fourth and fifth centuries, operating as the historico-theological precedent for all subsequent formulation.

To reiterate, this description of the patristic tradition as canonical is not meant to equate patristic authority with that of the Bible. Any of the ancient church fathers would have been horrified to find their written legacy placed on a par with Holy Scripture. Simply put, the tradition is not revelatory in the way that Scripture

is revelatory. Roman Catholics do refer to tradition as revelation partly to defend the ongoing work of God in the church, but they also view this revelation as being on a lower plane than Holy Writ. Vatican II makes this clear enough. But whether one takes a Protestant or a Roman Catholic view, the tradition birthed in the patristic era has been given a preferential place for most of the church's history. Despite the recognition that each period of church history has made its own distinct contributions and will continue to do so, the early church was unique for giving Christianity the canons of Scripture and the tradition.

A well-articulated case for the patristic age as a theological and credal canon can be found in the Congregation for Catholic Education's "Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests."<sup>25</sup> During a dinner conversation several years ago with Cardinal Francis George of the archdiocese of Chicago, I asked why the Roman Catholic students did not seem well versed in the writings of the early fathers. For a long time I had assumed that Roman Catholics were familiar with the early church and Protestants were not. When I began to teach at Loyola University in Chicago, I discovered that students from neither communion knew much about them. Cardinal George did not disagree with my observation and wondered aloud whether the longstanding emphasis on philosophical training in Catholic seminaries had caused church historical studies to become more marginalized than they should have been. He suggested the above article as a contribution toward correcting the imbalance. Both Protestants and Roman Catholics would do well to pay it heed.

Its overall thrust is an encouragement for greater integration of the study of the early fathers into the curricula of seminaries and departments of theology. Quite rightly, this article observes that the present condition of the church, in light of its pastoral mission and the constant emergence of new currents of spirituality, calls for "healthy nourishment and reliable sources . . . of true wisdom and Christian authenticity that flow from patristic works." With good reason does the congregation's instruction contend that patristic thought provides an excellent model for catechesis, scriptural understanding, shaping of the tradition, and knowledge about the whole person by which all subsequent

25. Published in *Origins* 19 (1990): 550-61.



centuries may compare their own proclamation and ministry. As Christ-centered and prime examples of a unified, living theology that "matured in contact with the problems of the pastoral ministry,"<sup>26</sup> the early fathers are called "the privileged witnesses of tradition." Regardless of what should be included as part of the church's tradition, "the fathers are always linked with tradition, having been both its protagonists and its witnesses."<sup>27</sup> Historically, it is through them that the scriptural canon was set, that the basic professions of faith (*regulae fidei*) were composed, and that the deposit of faith in response to heresy and contemporary culture was defined, giving rise to, properly speaking, Christian theology. No less, they gave the first reflective responses to Scripture, formulating these responses within the daily pastoral practice of experience and teaching, having authored the first Christian catecheses, commentaries, and sermons.

### Formation of the Tradition as Canon (Orthodoxy)

Describing the canonical tradition of the patristic church is like describing a coat of many colors. It has different shades and hues that portray a composite, sometimes contrasting, garment of faith. When identifying the tradition, therefore, we are dealing not only with oral tradition or creeds but also with various embodiments of the patristic church—doctrine, texts, catechisms, confessions—that reveal how that tradition was shaped.<sup>28</sup> In this light, Irenaeus's introduction to the framework of the apostolic preaching in his day is instructive: "This is the drawing up of our faith, the foundation of the building, and the consolidation of a way of life."<sup>29</sup> Unlike the modern way of making distinctions within the theological enterprise, the ancients tended to conflate faith as doctrine and faith as response, that is, doctrine and practice. The tradition as Christian standard comprises both of these. Thus, believers should not imagine that a rehearsal of the church's faith is something only theologians do. The rule of faith is the "stuff" of the Christian life; it is a way of articulating one's

commitment to God that shares in the commitment of the whole church. Canonical faith is the catholic faith. The foundation of the church's canon of faith, as per Irenaeus, is modeled on the very revelation of God:

God the Father, uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible, one God the maker of all . . . the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was shown forth by the prophets according to the design of their prophecy and according to the manner in which the Father established; and through him [the Son] were made all things entirely. . . . He became a man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and bring to light life and bring about communion of God and man. And the third is the Holy Spirit, through the prophets prophesied . . . and who in the end of times has been poured forth in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God.

This is what Irenaeus calls the canon (or rule) of faith. More complex than a baptismal formula, the canon of faith is the norm that seals believers in baptism, expressing the actual process of salvation: "Those who are the bearers of the Spirit of God are led to the Word, that is, to the Son; and the Son takes them and presents them to the Father, and the Father confers incorruptibility."<sup>30</sup> As God sent his Son, who bequeathed the Holy Spirit to all believers, so we return to God, borne by the Spirit according to the gift of the Son.

Irenaeus also speaks of the canon of truth in several instances throughout an anti-Gnostic work titled *Against Heresies* (c. 178). Here he confronts Gnostic ways of construing the written Gospels by separating the Creator God from the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as another, drawing the conclusion that Christ represented not God the Creator but another God who is the means of our salvation. The upshot of this view is to see the world and Christ's redemption as having no link with each other and to make salvation a denial or escape from creation. To this Irenaeus replies, "The disciple of the Lord, therefore, wanting to put an end to all such teaching" should adhere to the "canon of truth in the church" (III.11, 1). The beginning line of the "canon" is cited: "that there is one Almighty God, who made all things by His Word (Christ),

26. *Ibid.*, 553.

27. *Ibid.*, 554.

28. Chapter 5 below will provide further discussion and examples of this variety.

29. Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 6.

30. *Ibid.*, 7.

both visible and invisible." This shows, Irenaeus says, "that by the Word, through whom God made the creation, He also bestowed salvation on mankind included in the creation." This is the very point of John 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (vv. 1-3). One may read the words of the gospel or consult the "canon" for the truths of the Christian church, which are called the first principles of the gospel (III.11, 7).

A slightly later contemporary of Irenaeus, Tertullian of Carthage, is also familiar with a concise and summary version of the rule of faith as conveyed in North Africa. His three recitals of the rule have been much discussed by scholars.<sup>31</sup> But Tertullian also describes the rule in terms of the tradition at large, expressed in Scripture and in catechetical summaries of the faith. After mentioning the harmony of truth expressed in the four Gospels, he writes:

These all start with the same rule of the faith, so far as relates to the only one God the Creator and His Christ, how he was born of a virgin, and came as a fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Never mind if there does occur some variation in the order of the narratives, provided that they be in agreement in the essential details.<sup>32</sup>

Those elements that the church believed (*fides quae creditur*) are discovered in the rule of faith, which was a standard for the faith in the sense that it was a distillation of the tradition. It stood for the apostolic faith itself just as it represented the message of Scripture. This is borne out by Tertullian's reference to the rule as the "law of faith" and how he defines an apostate as one who has "lapsed from the Rule of faith."<sup>33</sup> In effect, the rule was a product of and at the same time represented the Christian teaching in its totality. The tradition was most aptly framed in the words of the local rule, a view that continued well into the fourth century. A letter

from the council of Arles in Gaul (A.D. 314) to Sylvester, bishop of Rome, warns about the unstable minds of certain persons who "spit out the present authority, the tradition and the rule of truth of our God."<sup>34</sup> Christians in southern France naturally assumed that the Christians in Rome would know of and also embrace the authority of "the tradition and the rule of truth."

The basic content of the rule is similarly found fifty years after Irenaeus in the works of Hippolytus and Novatian, both clergy in the mid-third-century Roman Church. The *Apostolic Tradition*, ascribed to Hippolytus, usually figures in representative catechisms of early Christian texts.<sup>35</sup> Novatian's *On the Trinity* is lesser known but no less important for establishing the baseline of the tradition of the period. The opening line of the text begins, "The Rule of truth requires that we should first of all things believe on God the Father" and then proceeds to outline the meaning of the Father as omnipotent and Creator (chaps. 1-8), the Son as fully God who appeared to the prophets and is the sole redeemer of humanity (chaps. 9-28), and the Holy Spirit "promised to the church" (chap. 29). One also sees the concept and articulation of the canon of faith expressed in Origen's *On First Principles*. This production, in four books, is among the earliest known attempts to offer a unifying presentation of Christian theology, including God as Father, the Son as "second" to the Father, the Spirit as "third," the creation and destruction of the world, the soul, principalities and powers, and the doctrine of Scripture, "composed through the Spirit of God." All these points, on which Origen elaborates, are part of the "definite line and unmistakable rule" laid down by the church.<sup>36</sup> Such teaching is regarded as the "apostolic teaching," which ought to be believed by all Christians.

## The Nicæanum

Turning to the developments of the fourth and early fifth centuries, we see the rise of statements of faith that represent the activity

31. E.g., I. William Countryman, "Tertullian and the *Regula Fidei*," *Second Century* 2 (1982): 221-26; and B. Hägglund, "Die Bedeutung der 'regula fidei' als Grundlage theologischer Aussagen," *Studia Theologica* 12 (1958): 1-41.

32. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* IV.2.1.

33. Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1; and idem, *On the Prescription of Heretics* 3.

34. *Concilia Galliae A. 314-A. 506*, in *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, vol. 148, ed. C. Munier (Turnholt: Brepols, 1963), 4.

35. W. A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 1970), selection 394a.

36. Origen, *On First Principles* 2.

of the early church more universally than the varied instances of the rule of faith. In fact, the fourth century is a turning point in the patristic period, for without its contributions, the patristic church would not have come to be regarded as canonical. With the Nicene Creed and the events of the years that followed, a more permanent structure of expressing the tradition came to pass and became the primary source of authority for all later ages of the church.

Just like the corpus of Scripture, the normative status of the patristic tradition represented in the Nicene faith was not a foregone conclusion in its earliest stages. The widespread use of the rule of faith notwithstanding, there was no consensus in the beginning of the fourth century about the following: (1) How divine is Jesus Christ (is he God just like the Father is God)? (2) How is a trinitarian understanding of God compatible with the oneness of God? (3) How does Christ's divinity relate to his humanity and vice versa, assuming the full reality of both? Arriving at a resolution for these three major issues, at least confessionally, was the burden of the fourth- and fifth-century church.

We must bear in mind that the Nicene Creed was drafted at a time (A.D. 325) when theological debate over these three issues, especially the first two, was still in its infancy. Although the creed became the chief symbol of the later patristic period, the promulgation of the creed had minimal immediate effect on the theological landscape. At most, the creed served to heighten awareness of the issues that were at stake, but for the next quarter century or so it did little else on a constructive level. The reasons for this are not hard to see. In the early fourth century, precise definitions of important theological terms such as *person* or *substance* and whether the Greek term meant the same thing as the Latin term were yet to find general acceptance.<sup>37</sup> Equally problematic was that there was no agreement about which Bible passages were speaking about the Son's divinity and which were about the Son's humanity. When Jesus declared his dread of the "cup" before him (Matt. 26:37-39) or displayed ignorance about the time of his second coming (Mark 13:32), were these experiences applicable to his human nature?

37. For the Greeks, the word *hypostasis* could be translated in Latin as "substance" or "person." Most Easterners preferred to speak of the Trinity as three *hypostases*, which seemed to Westerners that they were saying that God is three substances, that is, three Gods.

And if so, what did this mean for his divine self? The very notion that God in Christ could really undergo suffering of any kind had rarely been addressed, and different answers abounded. Not until the time Augustine was completing his important work *On the Trinity* in 420 was there some consistency in dealing with such problems.

Regarding the evolution of a Christian doctrine of the Trinity, we cannot assume that the Nicene resolution was somehow built into the understanding of previous centuries. Doctrine did not simply unfold as if the later developments were already present within the early stages. There is no doubt that the second-century way of thinking about the Father and the Son was in terms of ranking: the Son was "second" to the Father; the Father was invisible God while the Son was visible God; the Father was eternal, but the Son emerged or was "begotten" from the Father at some point. Most bishops in the early fourth century took a similar view, since it preserved real distinctions within God. The Son was truly the Son, not the Father; the Son was "begotten" (John 1:14, 18, 3:16), whereas the Father was unbegotten and therefore different from the Son. Those who refused to subordinate the Son to the Father preferred to stress not God's threeness but his oneness. Often called Monarchians for the sole governing of one God, they stressed the unity of the Father and the Son to the degree that the only difference between the two was their names. Sometimes God appeared in history as the Father, and at other times he appeared as the Son, but he was always the same God. In this line of thought, the Son is just as divine as the Father because there is no essential difference between them.

Therefore, when the Nicene Creed declared that the Son is "of the same substance" (*homoousios*) as the Father, to drive home the full divinity of the Son, it sounded strange to many bishops present. Worse than the fact that the term never appears in the Bible (most confessional language prior to that time was taken from the Bible) was that it could easily be given a Monarchian interpretation. Suspicions were aroused because strong supporters of the creed were Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ankyra, known advocates of a Monarchian-type of view about God. While the Nicene Creed did rule out the kind of subordinatism associated with Arius and his supporters, it failed to articulate

how God is really a Trinity and therefore failed to distance itself from Monarchianism. In the end, the Nicene Creed did not create the doctrinal unanimity its proponents had intended. It also said nothing about the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son. For the next thirty years, councils continued to convene and propose other creeds with startling rapidity. Scholars of early Christianity have designated this period the era of creeds and councils. During this time, the Nicene Creed was merely one option among many.

By the 360s, the introduction of one creed after another had done little to achieve doctrinal harmony and had spent itself.<sup>38</sup> Just as important was the process of interpretation and reinterpretation that the Nicene Creed had been undergoing. An often-overlooked synod that met in Alexandria in 362 played an important role in the new reception of the Nicene Creed.<sup>39</sup> From the small amount of documentation that survives from this council, we know that it sent a conciliar letter to the church in Antioch acknowledging that the Holy Spirit is one God with the Father and the Son, because he is "proper to and inseparable from the essence of the Father and the Son."<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the council declared that the Nicene faith and its same-substance language (*homoousios*) was compatible with an emphasis on God as three (three *hypostases*). This was a critical recognition on the part of this council, one that was elaborated on and refined in the theological writings of Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa. Under their pens, Nicene theology became completely dissociated from the tinge of Monarchianism that had hounded the Nicene Creed from its inception.<sup>41</sup> In addition, attention was drawn to the complete divinity of the Holy Spirit as being of one substance with the Father and the Son.<sup>42</sup> What these interpretations offered was a

38. For the ecclesiastical and political side of how the Nicene Creed rose to dominance, see D. H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Nicene-Arian Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), chap. 1.

39. A. De Halleux, "La Réception du Symbole Oecuménique, de Nicée à Chalcedoine," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensis* 61 (1985): 11-12.

40. Tomus 5, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 4, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 484.

41. For this point, I am indebted to Michel Barnes, "The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon," in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric, and Community*, ed. L. Ayres and G. Jones, 47-67 (London: Routledge, 1998).

42. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31.9-10.

way of emphasizing God's threeness without subordinating the Son, and preserving God's oneness without making Father, Son, and Spirit a numerical identity. The council in 362 and others not mentioned here, as well as the theology of the Cappadocians, are symptomatic of a new turn in the perception of the Nicene faith. One can trace this reception across the lines of Eastern and Western theologians.

By the time of the Council of Constantinople in 381, the Nicene Creed had become pivotal in the preservation of Christian faithfulness.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, minutes from the Council of Constantinople were not made or do not survive, and apart from a few interchurch decisions (called "canons"), no record of a creed from the council exists. We know, however, from a conciliar letter to the emperor Theodosius that the council was intent on affirming Nicaea and decided to condemn heresies that had arisen against it. The records preserved at the Council of Chalcedon seventy years later reveal that the Nicene Creed figured into the council's proceedings but in a slightly reinterpreted form, now known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

43. The Nicene Creed: We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance from the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

It has been much debated whether this creed is an expansion of the Nicene Creed or comes from another source because the phrase "from the substance of the Father, God from God" is missing, along with some other terms.<sup>44</sup> It also contains the phrase "from the Father and the Son" in regard to the Holy Spirit's procession, probably a later Western inclusion, which is still contested by Eastern Orthodoxy as an unwarranted addition to Nicene theology. Another difference is that this creed is more thoroughly trinitarian than the Nicene; each member of the Trinity is described in relation to the other members. The creed of 325 says less about the Father and only mentions the Holy Spirit with no description at all, since the focus of the time was fixed on how the Son is no less divine than the Father. Nevertheless, in one of the big quirks of church history, this Constantinopolitan Creed was most often identified as the Nicene Creed until the present day, largely because it was appointed in the second half of the fifth century to be sung in the liturgy of the Eastern church and about a century later regularly appeared in the baptismal and eucharistic services in the West.

The next two ecumenical councils, Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), defined the true faith according to the Nicene Creed (i.e., the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed). Canon 7 issued at Ephesus reveals that these Christian leaders agreed that no new creed should be brought forward or composed "besides that which was settled by the holy fathers who assembled at Nicea, with the Holy Spirit."<sup>45</sup> It

44. "God from God" may have been a redundancy, but the reason for dropping "from the substance of the Father," Hanson surmises, is that it had maternal or corporeal suggestions. R. P. C. Hanson, "The Achievement of Orthodoxy in the Fourth Century AD," in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 154.

45. It may surprise evangelicals who claim the ecumenical councils as doctrinal authorities to learn that the Council of Ephesus made the title "Theotokos" ("God-bearer") official for the virgin Mary, thus stimulating and deepening Marian devotion in both East and West. Even so, the original impetus behind "Theotokos" was not Mary but the full divinity of the One born to her.

is evident that Nicaea and the revised creed associated with it had attained a normative status, a status that was apparent to the fathers at Chalcedon. The preface to the creed of Chalcedon reads:

This then we have done, having, by mutual agreement, driven away the doctrines of error, and having renewed the unerring faith of the Fathers, proclaiming to all the creed of the 318 [bishops] and endorsing as our own the Fathers who received this godly document, namely the 150 [bishops], who later met together in great Constantinople and set their seal to the same faith.

We decree, therefore . . . that the exposition of the orthodox and irreproachable faith set forth by the 318 holy and blessed Fathers who met at Nicaea . . . retain its place of honor, and also that definition of the 150 holy Fathers at Constantinople, for the removal of the heresies then recently sprung up, and for the confirmation of our same Catholic and Apostolic faith, continue still in force.<sup>46</sup>

There follows the citation of the Nicene (325) and Nicene-Constantinopolitan creeds, to which is then added a qualification about the Son's incarnation that stresses the perfection and indivisibility of his divinity and humanity as two separate natures in one person. Thus, the Chalcedonian Creed is, like the one presumably from Constantinople (381), an expansion of the Nicene formula, ensuring orthodox teaching regarding the dual nature of the God-man, Jesus Christ. Even so, the "confirmation of our same Catholic and Apostolic faith" was the joining of the Nicene and Constantinopolitan creeds. It is noteworthy that the decree of Chalcedon uses the singular, not the plural, to refer to both statements: "The wise and saving creed."<sup>47</sup>

In sum, these creeds function "canonically" when they communicate not only the literal terms of the creeds themselves but also the interpretation that lifted these creeds from among their conciliar peers and made them normative.<sup>48</sup> As with the reception of Nicaea, it was just as important to configure the meaning of the creed as it was to recount its words. Reminiscent of the fixed fluidity of the rule of faith of earlier centuries, the Chris-

46. Cited in J. Stevenson and W. H. C. Frend, eds., *Creeds, Councils, and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church AD 337-461* (London: SPCK, 1989), 350.

47. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Creeds: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 14.

48. Barnes, "Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon," 62.



tian leaders at Alexandria, Constantinople, and Chalcedon did not believe that the way of doctrinal faithfulness lay in the literal reproduction of the Nicene Creed.<sup>49</sup> In fact, it took the theological developments of a "neo-Nicene" interpretation of the creed over the course of a century for the creed to return to general acceptance and circulation within the churches.

Beyond Chalcedon, future church councils looked to the Nicene Creed as the beginning point for establishing orthodoxy. No matter how many more ecumenical councils one accepts, whether a total of seven with the Eastern Orthodox<sup>50</sup> or twenty-one with Roman Catholicism,<sup>51</sup> or whether other important but not ecumenical councils figure as authoritative sources for doctrine,<sup>52</sup> none of these shares the same foundational character as the patristic creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries. The so-called fifth ecumenical council (Constantinople II) "set its seal to the Creed which was put forth by the 318 fathers [Nicene] and again piously confirmed by the 150 [Constantinople, 381] which also other holy synods received and ratified." A similar affirmation was made by the sixth and seventh ecumenical councils. The seventh, or the Council of Nicaea II, made it clear that the Nicene Creed was preeminent among the later ecumenical creeds. Unto the present day then, the Nicene Creed is the statement par excellence of what the Christian church believes, as one finds in the liturgies of Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and various Protestant orders of service. Along with the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed (in its original and liturgical forms) has been the heart of ecumenical confessionality and is the basis on which nearly all Christian communions can agree.

### Precedents for Theological Canoncity

Making appeal to the patristic faith as norm or canon is admittedly a retrospective observation. By its very nature, a canon is

49. De Halleux, "La Réception," 25.

50. In addition to the first four, Constantinople (553), Constantinople (680), and Nicaea (787) are designated "ecumenical" because they were supposedly councils of the undivided church. These seven stand as the formal deposit of normative teaching for Eastern Orthodoxy.

51. C. J. Hefele, *A History of the Christian Councils* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1894), 63-64.

52. E.g., Serdica (342/3), Carthage (397), and Toledo (400).

regarded as canonical only as its contents are consistently received and generally accepted as unique sources of authority. This is what lay behind the definition of the catholic faith given by Vincent of Lérins, basing it on the rules of universality, antiquity, and general consent.<sup>53</sup> Similar to the history of the Nicene Creed is the reception of the broader patristic tradition. Recognition of its authority was a reflexive and *post hoc* series of events that came to characterize the orthodox identity of the Christian church.

Lest one still imagines that the functional canonicity of the patristic theological legacy is an idiosyncratic category of my own making, one should consider the following stages briefly summarized.

First, specific terminology in reference to the patristic faith as "norm" or "canon" is not found in Luther and Melancthon, yet the concept is indigenous to their assumptions about church history. By advocating the sufficiency of Scripture, Luther never intended to reject the sources that the church had held and used for the past fifteen hundred years. Nor did he share the same idea about the institutional church's "fall" with the Anabaptists. His attitude toward the teaching established by the early church revealed a critical but constructive view of the church's history. As Luther worked toward constructing an understanding of church history, he continued to value the importance of the early creeds and writings of the fathers as vehicles for protecting the church from error. Not that the early period of the church provided him with an ideal age to which one must return. It operated rather like that of the Old Testament patriarchs for the church: that of revealing a permanent pattern that modeled faithfulness for all future believers.

It was especially important when instructing new believers to expose them to the church's foundational teaching. In a sermon Luther preached on the catechism in 1528, he stated concerning the Apostles' Creed, "[This teaching [the Apostles' Creed] is different from that of the commandments [the Ten Commandments]. The commandments teach what we should do, but the Creed teaches what we have received from God. The Creed, therefore, gives you what you need. This is the Christian faith."<sup>54</sup> The same attitude

53. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 1.2, 6.

54. From "Sermons on the Creed," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. J. Dillenberger (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 214.

is espoused with regard to the Nicene Creed, to which believers are urged to adhere as the best explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Nicaea was an important conciliar moment in church history not only because it demonstrated that the primacy of Rome had not existed in the early church but also because it set forth a theological measuring stick. In regard to the four great councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon) and their creeds, Luther asserted that they established no new articles of faith but merely defended what had been given by the Holy Spirit to the apostles at Pentecost.<sup>55</sup>

Until the end of his life, Luther maintained that a reform of the church should be accomplished by convening a general council. Authority for the proposed council ought to be grounded, he said, in the authority of the four great councils, Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), which established the norm for Christian doctrine. Because the message of these creeds was wholly commensurate with the message of the gospel as found in Scripture, all subsequent conciliar decisions must be judged according to their doctrinal standards.<sup>56</sup> Such a view marked the perspective of the Protestant Reformation generally, as in Melancthon, who cited the early fathers and creeds throughout the Augsburg Confession as authorities for determining the true Christian faith from the false. The first article of faith states, "The churches among us teach with complete unanimity that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the unity of the divine essence and concerning the three persons is true and is to be believed without any doubt."<sup>57</sup> Veritably hundreds of citations from the ancient fathers are cited in confirmation of the newly emerging Lutheran theology.

In the early Reformed tradition, Calvin stated that the language of consubstantiality in the Nicene Creed was "simply expounding the real meaning of Scripture," being the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>58</sup>

55. Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," in *Luther's Works*, ed. T. G. Tapert and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 50:551, 607.

56. *Ibid.*, 41:121-22. In *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith* (1538), Luther published his own edited versions of the Apostles' Creed and Athanasian Creed as well as the *De Deum* (a hymnic confession), to which the Nicene Creed was appended.

57. R. Kolb and T. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 37.

58. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.viii.16.

Although complete primacy was given to Scripture in all matters of doctrine and life, Calvin defended the patristic position that nonscriptural terms had to be used in order to define a scriptural understanding of God.<sup>59</sup> All the major fathers confirmed the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, as did the ancient councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon), of which Calvin says, "I venerate from my heart and desire that they be honored by all."<sup>60</sup> As his *Reply to Cardinal Sadoleto* (1539) shows, Calvin was convinced that the Reformation was in line with the doctrines of the early church. The true church that the apostles instituted is commensurate with the ancient form of the church, exhibited by the writings of Chrysostom and Basil, among the Greek writers, and Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine and is "embodied in our religion."

Second, the Reformers drew their knowledge of patristic church history largely from medieval collections of canon law and anthologies of excerpted patristic texts, which, before the fifteenth century, were the primary means by which readers were exposed to texts of the early fathers.<sup>61</sup> The most influential collection was the massive twelfth-century *Harmony of Discordant Canons*, later known as the *Decree of Gratian*. It taught with absolute certainty that the "four venerable synods, before all others, shelter the whole of the faith, like the four Gospels or the like-numbered rivers of Paradise. . . . These four chief synods proclaim most fully the doctrine of the faith."<sup>62</sup> Other subsequent councils were recognized, but they were subject to the authority of these four.<sup>63</sup> Overall, the *Decree* presents thousands of citations and allusions to the ancient fathers, although

59. *Ibid.*, I.xiii.3.

60. The four councils are distinguished from all subsequent councils since only the four contain nothing but "the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture," which the holy fathers applied with spiritual prudence against the enemies of the faith (*Ibid.*, IV.ix.8).

61. Not until the early sixteenth century were actual editions of the most important fathers available. See Irena Backus, "The Early Church in the Renaissance and Reformation," in *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to A.D. 600*, ed. I. Hazlett, 291-303 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

62. *Gratian: The Treatise on Laws (Decretum DD 1-20) with the Ordinary Gloss*, trans. A. Thompson and J. Gordley (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), pars I, dist. XVI.1.

63. Distinction XVI.8 professes eight ecumenical councils to be "held worthy of equal honor and veneration." This contradicts the above resolution, though such contradictions are in keeping with the decree's presentation of discordant historical data.

they are dispersed among conciliar decisions, pontifical letters, and decrees, making it difficult to discern patristic from later historical material. Nevertheless, the *Decree* functioned for the rest of the Middle Ages and the Reformation as the primary source treasury for encountering select passages from the early fathers.

Another major sourcebook of patristic testimonia was found in *Glossa Ordinaria* (also called *The Gloss*), itself a series of patristic quotations on the Bible from the ninth century. The ancient comments were originally arranged in the margins of each page of the Bible, but eventually the comments were published in a separate volume. *The Gloss* was heavily utilized by Thomas Aquinas in his thirteenth-century commentary on the four Gospels called *Catena Aurea* (*The Golden Chain*),<sup>64</sup> in which he fashioned a continuous chain of passages compiled entirely from the writings of the early fathers. For his *catenae* on Matthew, Aquinas made almost exclusive use of the Latin fathers, with the notable exception of the Greek writers, John Chrysostom, and occasional citations from Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus.

Third, the medieval canonical collections were themselves based on select Latin proponents of late patristic opinion. Second only to Augustine's works were the writings of Gregory of Rome ("the Great"), whose bishopric is placed by church historians at either the end of the patristic period or the beginning of the medieval period. In one of his many letters that are preserved, he declared, "I receive and revere as the four books of the gospel so also the four councils," that is, the Nicene, Constantinopolitan, Ephesus, and Chalcedonian, "since on them, as on a four-square stone, rises the structure of the holy faith."<sup>65</sup> Gregory admits he also accepts other later councils, but it is upon the four first councils, "having been constituted by universal consent," that the norms for Christian faith and life reside. We may regard Gregory's arguments as "traditional," for he is drawing on previous patristic writers, not only for the fourfold view of councils but even for his analogies of fourfold as a sacrosanct number because of the four Gospels.

64. John Henry Newman, ed. and trans., *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels* (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1841), recently reprinted with an introduction by A. Nichols (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999). Thomas completed his first and most substantial volume on Matthew's Gospel by 1264, dedicated to Pope Urban IV.

65. Gregory of Rome, *Epistle* 25.

Gregory shared the structure of authority that Vincent of Lérins had outlined a century earlier. Orthodox Christianity could be proven in two ways: "First, by the authority of the divine canon (the Bible), and the other by the tradition of the catholic church." The authority of the first outweighed the authority of the second, for Vincent claims that the canon (of Scripture) suffices alone on any matter. But he acknowledged that the Bible cannot function in isolation from the early church's tradition lest it fall prey to faulty interpretations. A rule of faith or norm for interpretation is essential if orthodox faith is to be achieved. "It is therefore necessary that the interpretation of divine Scripture should be ruled according to the one standard of the church's belief, especially in those articles on which the foundations of all catholic doctrine rest."<sup>66</sup>

Because the patristic and medieval ages always sought classical wisdom as prerequisites for establishing authority, we should expect the kind of thought expressed above about the patristic past. However, it would be a mistake to portray the late antique mind as not having self-awareness about what it was doing and why. Preservation of ancient *auctoritates* (authorities) did have its limits. Many manuscripts deemed carriers of views unfaithful to the tradition were either corrected (a nightmare for text historians!) or conveniently "lost." Clearly, for the Lutheran, the Reformed, some Anabaptist Reformers, and virtually all the medieval writers, the patristic age acted as the norm of the apostolic and catholic faith. It was, in effect, the theological canon of the church. The shape of the major doctrines finally achieved in the fourth and fifth centuries had become a permanent fixture of the Christian faith. None of this meant that future theological exploration and reflections were to be discouraged. Councils continued to meet after Chalcedon. Important doctrinal gains were made in the millennium following the patristic age, gains not only of deeper insight into already established doctrinal truths (e.g., Bonaventure's explication of Christ's redemptive suffering) but also of reconfiguring how one thinks of these truths (e.g., Aquinas's construal of the Trinity or Anselm's theory of the God-man's incarnation). Always integral to such growth was that it

66. Gregory of Rome, *Communitorium* I.29. 76. This part is really the end of the second book of the *Communitorium*, the first part being lost.

was built directly on the solutions of the patristic achievement, which had forever etched a trinitarian character and its implications into Christian theology and worship.

### How Not to Use the Early Fathers

Admittedly, arguing for the patristic tradition as theologically normative can be pushed to extremes. The early fathers have been idealized so that everything they said provides good guidance for today's church. One can resort to the patristic legacy as a "golden age" that Christians should recall from the past, as if invoking it ushers into the present a sort of historical power. An exceptional find in the Egyptian desert some years ago was a papyrus fragment that contained a portion of the text of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381). The fragmentary portion dates from the later fifth century, and scholars think it may have been used as a kind of amulet.<sup>67</sup> Evidently, the wearer of this credal formula thought that the creed possessed power such that it could invite God's blessing or ward off evil spirits and misfortune!

This chapter is not advocating the patristic legacy as if it were an ecclesiastical charm bracelet, nor should it be interpreted to mean that a reclamation of all or any one aspect of the ancient tradition will solve all the denominational splits and doctrinal muddles that beset contemporary Christianity. As stated in the preface, the notion of *ressourcement* is not about romantically reappropriating the early fathers as if they hold all the answers for contemporary Christians and churches. The patristic tradition was not and is not infallible. None of the creeds that originated from that age is inerrant. Even the staunchest defender of the contemporary relevance of patristic resources will admit that not everything the patristic fathers taught is true or even valuable.

While the patristic faith predates the great church schisms of 1054 and later, it also is a mistake to depict the ancient faith as presenting a uniform expression of doctrine that bears witness to a single faith. Some recent Protestant writers, who have a newfound

zeal for appropriating the early fathers in the face of theological modernity, have been inclined toward idealistic presentations of them and their value for us today. On the one hand, to claim the authority of the patristic consensual tradition may easily be interpreted in a crude metaphysical sense unless we understand that the church's historic witnesses must always be heard within the rough and tumble world of interchurch polemics, uncertainty, and no one agreed-upon method of biblical exegesis. The early church was truly engaged in a search—sometimes haphazardly—for a Christian doctrine of God rather than slowly unveiling what it knew implicitly all along. When it comes to acknowledging the foundational creeds, we are faced with viewing them not merely as doctrinal touchstones but as diachronic statements of faith whose theological and polemical contexts are just as important as the words themselves.

We may agree with certain Protestant theologians who say that whatever authoritative status we attribute to the great conciliar creeds, particularly the Nicene Creed, they are not binding on the Christian faith or conscience.<sup>68</sup> In reply, one might say that neither is the Mosaic law, which constitutes a number of the books Christians regard as canonical. The dialogical form in which the major creeds were formulated (the augmentation of the Nicene Creed at Constantinople and Chalcedon) underscores the idea that these statements were *constructions* of how the church addressed its present circumstances by utilizing what it had received. This is why there are so many ecclesiastical creeds in the fourth century and beyond. They were, in effect, milestones of the tradition's argument with itself about the nature of orthodoxy as new doctrinal issues were addressed in light of what the church had always believed.

### Excursus: The Bible as Canon

With the rise of a biblical canon in the later patristic era, the canon of the church's tradition was not eclipsed or outmoded. It is misguided to assert that the early tradition receded as the

67. "Fragment of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed," in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, ed. G. H. R. Horsley (Maconquarie: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1981), 103-4.

68. Most recently, Everett Ferguson made this point in a paper about how a free churchman should appraise and receive the patristic legacy. See Everett Ferguson, "Article Review," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002): 104.

canonization of Scripture preceded. Changes in the role of the rule of faith took place after the third century, but this was not because of an ascending scriptural canon.

What is remarkable about the historic emphasis on the canon of the Bible is that the terminology of "canon" or "rule" is virtually never used for sacred books until the later fourth century, and even then there is only sparse mention. The fact that there was very little interest on the part of the patristic church to formulate a canonical list of books testifies to its lack of importance. The comment by F. F. Bruce that the earliest Christians did not trouble themselves about the criteria of canonicity of texts<sup>69</sup> rings true. Marcion's insistence that only the Pauline Epistles and an expurgated version of Luke's Gospel presented true Christianity is easily overinterpreted to mean that he was propounding a scriptural canon and thereby instigated the early church to do likewise. Despite the prevalent theory that Marcion prompted, at least indirectly, the growth of the biblical canon, we know of no second- or third-century writer who responded to Marcion's considerable theological challenge with a fixed canon of books. In the case of Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Ephrem of Nisibis, and the many others who responded in writing, the Marcionite position was attacked through highlighting the canon of truth or the rule of faith. While it is true that the majority of churches were using the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline Epistles, and some other epistles as Scripture by the early second century and found Marcion's "Bible" unacceptable, there was nothing like a unity about the extent or parameters of the biblical books. Opposition to Marion, therefore, could not have been in the form of an alternative, "orthodox" canon of texts.

The same generally applies to the patristic approach to Gnosticism. Serapion of Antioch complained that the gospel of Peter was being read (i.e., as Scripture) in the worship services of some churches.<sup>70</sup> The problem was that the text carries manifestly docteric ideas about Christ,<sup>71</sup> ideas that were unacceptable for an orthodox view of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the Gospels. Serapion declared that the ultimate rejection of the heretical gospel was

69. Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 255.

70. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI.12.

71. A "docteric" Christ is one whose physical reality is mitigated or denied. Gnostics were not the only groups to think this way.

not because it was missing from lists of scriptural books but because it violated the traditional faith of the (Antiochene) church. Down the coast in Alexandria, a Christian thinker named Clement (d. 220) faulted the Gnostics with an inability to understand the Bible because they failed to understand the tradition. In his words, the Gnostics needed to explain Scripture according to the "canon of truth" (or the "ecclesiastical rule"), which entailed a proper understanding of the harmony between the Old and New Testaments.<sup>72</sup>

To find the small handful of remarks about the extent of the biblical canon, one has to dig in the known writings of later patristic authors for comment on the subject. Overall, the matter appears to have had limited importance for them, acknowledged in polemical contexts or for instruction in the Christian faith. It is in this context that the famous Muratorian Fragment and Athanasius's Easter letter 39 may be placed. Much has been written about both of these,<sup>73</sup> so let me offer three other less celebrated (but no less important) examples.

Besides (perhaps) the Muratorian Fragment, Eusebius of Caesarea is the earliest source for providing a catalog of biblical books that were accepted in his day. He is acquainted with the term *canon*,<sup>74</sup> but it is not his preferred terminology, likely because there was no one fixed body of biblical books by the late third and early fourth century. His narration is built around which books were the "acknowledged writings," which were disputed, and which were spurious. He was keenly interested to report how illustrious Christian thinkers in the church's history used Scrip-

72. Clement, *Stromata* VI.15, 125.

73. The so-called Muratorian canon, a list of books in the New Testament, is found in the Codex Muratorianus, a fragmented seventh- or eighth-century manuscript that also contains confessions of faith, homilies on Scripture, and other theological subjects. The dating of the fragment is problematic, ranging from the late second to the fourth century (see G. M. Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992]). Athanasius addressed a letter every year to his congregation in Alexandria at Easter time. Letter 39 was the annual communication for the year 367, according to the internal chronology of the collection. T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 189.

74. Eusebius states (*Ecclesiastical History* III.9, 5) that Josephus gave the "number of the canonical writings in the Old Testament" (*Reply to Apton* 1.8). The term *canonical* is Eusebian, not from Josephus. The phrase "canon of the church" is used of Origen's knowledge of the extent of the biblical books (VI.25, 3).



ture and which books they used. For Eusebius, the undisputed biblical books were authoritative because they were "recognized by the churches under heaven" (III.24, 2), and as such, these writings were those "acknowledged" by the churches. Several times Eusebius summarized the books of the Old Testament. Only once did he itemize the writings of the New Testament (III.25, 1-7), explaining that only the four Gospels, Acts, the epistles of Paul, one of Peter, one of John, and perhaps Revelation were among the "acknowledged" texts. It appears that "disputed books" were read in many churches, as were the spurious.

Roughly seventy years later, Augustine enumerated a list of scriptural books accepted in the West in *On Christian Teaching*, a theological handbook for fellow pastors on interpreting the Bible. Typical of patristic authors, Augustine saw the Bible as a completely divine product; every sentence and possible meaning were intended by the Spirit's inspiration. Augustine's attempt to nail down an official list of books is indicative of a situation that lacked a single list. There was no one authoritative version of the Bible. Indeed, readers are told that when it comes to determining the authoritative list of books, they should follow the lead of as many catholic churches as possible. In the case of those books not universally accepted, they should prefer those received by a majority of churches. This did not mean that the collection of Scripture known to him was not canonical. Several times Augustine called Scripture canonical or the canon.<sup>75</sup> What he called the "authoritative Old Testament" contained forty-four books, following the Septuagint version, and is reflected today in the Roman Catholic Bible. There seemed to be less controversy over the boundaries of the "authoritative New Testament," which squares with versions of the Bible today.

Another canonical list is found in a document known as the *Canons of the Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*. This work is a kind of appendix to the larger *Constitutions*, both of which are compilations of different works from different times edited together around the late fourth or early fifth century. In canon 85, the writer provides a complete inventory of the Old and New Testaments, adding to the New Testament 1 and 2 *Clement* and eight books of the *Constitutions* (falsely) attributed to Clement.

75. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* II.24, 26.

Given the antiquity and revered status of 1 and 2 *Clement*, it is not surprising that they are mentioned among the biblical books, though the motives of the author are suspicious. Inclusion of the *Constitutions* is completely irregular and represents nothing more than special pleading on the writer's part in order to identify himself with the historic Clement and win acceptance of his work. The fact that such a tactic was tried underlines the lack of fixity that the biblical canon possessed even four centuries after the apostles.

### Untidy Canonization

Overall, the process of biblical canonization was much less neat and categorical than modern renditions of the process make it out to be. The reason for this is important precisely because the reasons are difficult to quantify. Determination of the shape and content of the biblical canon, just like the theological canon, occurred as the text was received and consistently affirmed by individual churches. At Baylor University, students in my courses on patristic studies are usually more comfortable if we can pinpoint concrete events that gave rise to the scriptural canon. One can see a certain amount of frustration on their faces as they discover the inadequacy of cause and effect reasons to explain the process. We cannot point simply to the Jewish precedents of the Jewish scholars who met at Jabneh (Jamnia) at the end of the first century and acknowledged the twenty-two books of the Old Testament,<sup>76</sup> or to the negative influence of Marcionism that compelled Christians to create an orthodox canon, or to a church council that decided the issue of the biblical books once and for all.<sup>77</sup> The more mundane truth is that the canonical pro-

76. Whatever credence should be attributed to Jabneh, its purpose seems to have been aimed at providing clarity about only the third part of the Hebrew Bible, the hagiographa.

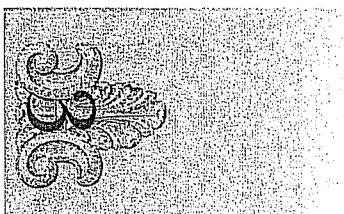
77. None of the so-called ecumenical or any major council, East or West, treated the matter of biblical canonization. A small council that met in Rome in 382 is thought to have enumerated the canonical books of both testaments in a document known as the Tome of Damasus. Damasus was bishop of Rome and convoked councils of bishops to set church policy throughout Italy, but it is doubtful that the biblical list, which one manuscript also calls the "Decree of Gelasius on Which Books Should and Should Not Be Received," is actually from the proceedings of the council.

cess of tradition and text occurred primarily in the context of the believing community. Canonical "testing" took place within the give and take of church life. James Sanders states the dynamic at work: "The community shaped the text as it moved toward canon and the text or tradition shaped the communities as it found its pilgrimage toward canon."<sup>78</sup> The infrequent references to a normative list of texts suggest that Christian churches were not looking to create a canon but were seeking to hear God's Word in the Scripture readings during worship and ascertain which readings conveyed this Word. Public reading of Scripture is mentioned explicitly by Paul in 1 Timothy 4:13 as an activity intended for the entire church. In the process of liturgically reading in assembly, authoritative weight was accrued by texts that lent to their canonization.<sup>79</sup> Though perhaps more inchoate and unpredictable than we would like, there was, nevertheless, discernment in the process. In this manner, the church, for example, came to reject the gospel of Peter and the gospel of Thomas, whereas it continued to embrace Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.<sup>80</sup>

78. James Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), 163.

79. Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 70-71.

80. A fuller study on the canonical process will be forthcoming by Craig Allert in this same series.



## THE CONFLUENCE OF THE BIBLE, THE TRADITION, AND THE CHURCH

For every man alone thinkes he hath got  
To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee  
None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.

John Donne, *An Anatomie of the World*

IT MAY COME as a surprise to some readers that for most of church history Scripture and tradition were perceived as generally compatible with each other. The tradition, or the catholic teaching, was the distillation of biblical truth and theoretically always existed in an interrelated harmony with Scripture. In response to the religious leader of a group whose members vaunted themselves as true Christians but who rejected the truly human birth of Christ, Augustine said, "The catholic, which is also the apostolic, doctrine is that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is both the Son of God in his divine nature and the Son of David after