

# CHURCH HISTORY

A Creed, a Canon, and an Organization (A.D. 96-313)

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## Early Church History, part 8

### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Before a study of the Church Fathers can be undertaken, there must be an understanding of the development of the organized church during the second and third centuries.
- B. Before A.D. 313 (the Edict of Milan), the seeds of hierarchy were already planted, and this laid the basis for the Roman Catholic Church, which gained complete control around A.D. 590.

### II. HERESY CHALLENGES THE CHURCH

- A. Heresy attacked the church during the time when the twelve apostles were living, but after their deaths there was much more heresy because the apostles could no longer enforce their authority. These heresies became a serious menace to the Church.
- B. *Gnosticism*: Early in the second century there arose a particular brand of heresy called Docetism, which denied that Christ ever dwelt on this earth in human form. It claimed that Christ's body was not real flesh, but had ghostly qualities. These early Gnostics found great impetus under a man named Marcion (A.D. 140) who rejected the Old Testament and believed only Luke and ten of Paul's epistles to be inspired.
- C. *Montanism*: Montanism taught that Christ's promise of the Comforter had not been fulfilled in the upper room on Pentecost, but that the coming of the Holy Spirit had finally come and that the end of the world was near. Montanists claimed special revelations from God, and practiced asceticism.

### III. A CREED

- A. Because of these heresies which were gaining a foothold in the church, there was a need to have a creed to which Christians would assent, declaring their faithfulness to Jesus Christ and the true, universal church. “Creed” comes from the Latin word which means “I believe.” Thus, the Apostles’ Creed was formed. It is the Apostles’ Creed not because it was written by the apostles, but because it is a compilation of the basic teachings of the apostles. The Apostles’ Creed is not a comprehensive creedal statement, but it does include the major doctrines.
- B. The modern day Apostles’ Creed has a few more sentences than the one (Old Roman Symbol) that was read early in the fourth century. The Apostles’ Creed says:

“I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of Heaven and Earth; and in Jesus Christ his only (begotten) Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.”

### IV. A CANON

- A. The word “canon” means “list,” and refers to those books that are inspired of God and belong to the Old and New Testaments. The early church had already accepted 39 books of the Old Testament, but there was a great need to have a canon for the New Testament books.
- B. The heretic Marcion’s canon may have impelled the true church to formalize a list of those books it considered to be the God-inspired books of the New Testament. Also, the apologists of the second century constantly quoted Scripture to prove the heretics wrong, providing additional incentive to codify a list of books belonging to the canon. Further, late in the second century there were terrible persecutions against Christians, and the state of Rome said that Christians would die for possessing any of the apostles’ letters. If Christians

were going to die, they wanted to die for the inspired Word, not some false letter.

## V. AN ORGANIZATION

- A. As heresy threatened the church, there was an ever increasing need to determine who were true Christians, part of the universal Church. True Christians identified themselves with the visible, outward organization of the Church. Many Roman Catholics and some Protestants believe that if a person is within the confines of the organized church then he is saved. This leads to a doctrine of salvation by church membership or affiliation. Evangelical Christians also believe that there is no salvation outside of the church, meaning not the local, visible or organized church, but the true, universal and invisible Church which is the body of Christ.
- B. Heresy was met with the episcopal form of church government. The leaders of these heretical groups also claimed support from the Bible. The church had to establish its position as the authority who decided the meaning of the Bible. The church exercised this authority through its rulers who came to be called bishops.
- C. In the first century and in the New Testament, the titles “bishop,” “presbyter” and “elder” all applied to the same office. Local churches were ruled by elders who were equal in authority. However, it was natural that among the elders there would be one who would lead even the elders. This leader of leaders could have been the pastor-teacher. This leading elder would be president of the board of presbyters, and he would lead in worship and do the preaching.
- D. Early in the second century, the church began to distinguish between elders and bishops. The other elders gradually became subordinate to the presbyter who was their bishop, and the bishops who came to rule in the church were called “monarchical bishops.”
- E. Local churches were first established in cities, so the people in the rural areas continued to be largely heathen. The Latin word for country or rural people was *pagani*, so the name *pagani* or “pagans” became equivalent to the word “heathen.” The converts from the rural areas would attend church in the cities. Soon the city with its surrounding rural area was called a “diocese.” Then, the bishop became the leader over the diocese and was called a “diocesan bishop.”

Churches in some cities had a diocesan bishop before the city of Rome did. Around A.D. 110, Ignatius was bishop of Antioch, and Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna. These bishops were supposed to be the successors of the apostles, and had great authority in the church.

- F. By A.D. 200, the church had become welded into one compact whole. All had the Apostles' Creed, the New Testament canon, and the episcopal form of government. The church was henceforth known as the Catholic (Universal) Church, and also as the Old Catholic Church. The pagans and heretics were outside the visible organization of the church.
- G. Every monarchical bishop was equal in authority at first, but the bishops of the bigger and politically more powerful cities became the more prominent bishops. This is nothing more than church politics. These bishops of big churches in the large cities became known as "metropolitan bishops."
- H. By the middle of the third century, there were five bishops competing to be the controlling bishop of the metropolitan bishops. The bishops of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Rome all claimed primacy among the bishops. The bishops of the churches in these large cities became known as patriarchs.
- I. Rome was the only major city in the West, so the bishop of Rome went unchallenged in the western section of the church. The other four patriarchs of major cities were all from the eastern section of the church, and there was a keen rivalry between them. The bishops of Alexandria, Constantinople and Antioch, in their disputings, would sometimes appeal to the bishop of Rome, a neutral bishop, to help solve their differences. In almost every controversy, theological or practical, the bishop of Rome became the arbitrator. Around A.D. 185 Irenaeus wrote *Against Heresies* in which he stated that every church must agree with the Church at Rome on doctrinal and practical matters.
- J. There was strenuous opposition sometimes to the claims of the bishop of Rome, especially in the East, but in the end the churches in the West acknowledged his supremacy. With this acknowledgement the papacy had come into existence. The bishop of Rome came to be called "pope," a title derived from the Latin word *papa*, meaning "father," and the church over which the pope ruled as supreme head came to be known as the Roman Catholic Church. By A.D. 313 the foundation for the papacy was clearly set, and by A.D. 590 the Roman Catholic hierarchy was fully entrenched.