

IS THE CANON CLOSED?

In previous studies we have considered the authority of Scripture and the forming of the Canon. A question that arises now is whether the Canon is closed or open – should we expect more prophetic revelations from God or have we got it all? Another angle to broach the subject is with regard to the potential discovery of the “lost letter” of Paul to the Corinthians (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9). If this letter were found in an archeological dig should it be included in our Bible? In more recent times fragments of documents have been unearthed such as “The wife of Jesus” reference in a 4th Century Coptic script¹ the question is; how are we to view these with reference to the Scriptures – are they authoritative?

There are three basic positions with regard to the discussion of an open or closed canon.² Two views argue for an “open canon.” The first proposes that the New Testament is a human anthology of divinely inspired writings. The second view is that the New Testament is a complete entity, divinely inspired by God but that it is being continually supplemented “by additional, new word revelation, by living prophetic voices in the Church.”³ The third view holds that the New Testament, along with the Old Testament is God’s authoritative and complete word, definite and absolute. It is this third view that I am defending here.

Before I argue for a closed canon let me first stress the importance of the subject. We need to be clear why it is essential that we hold to a closed canon of Holy Scripture.

- a. **It maintains consistently the sufficiency of Scripture.** Continued and indefinite revelation denies the sufficiency of Scripture. To expect more imply the insufficiency of what we have in the 66 books of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- b. **It maintains consistently the relevancy of Scripture.** Continued and indefinite revelation denies the relevance of Scripture for today. The Scripture as it was written and concluded 2000 years ago is as relevant for me today as it was for those in the early Church. The Scripture speaks to every possible contingency that the human soul encounters.
- c. **It maintains consistently the organic unity of Scripture.** Continued and indefinite revelation denies the Bible is a unit. There is an organic nature in the text of Scripture that finds full flower in later Scripture. We can see this in the big picture with the conquest begun in Genesis and completed victory of Christ in Revelation. Everything in the human experience relates to this conquest.
- d. **It is consistent with the idea of canon.** Continued and indefinite revelation denies the idea of Canon. Walter C. Kaiser states;⁴

“The very idea of a canon implies a standard or authoritative measuring device by which a collection of books is recognized as norms for the community.”

There are three simple arguments that I want to present to show that the New Testament Canon is closed and that we should not expect any further revelation from God. The three arguments

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-19645273>; accessed 13th October 2012.

² Gaffin, Richard B. *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 180

³ *Ibid*, 180

⁴ Kaiser, Walter C. and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 198.

are as follows – the Old Testament model, the circumstances of the New Testament revelation and the teaching of the New Testament itself all point towards a completed and closed Canon.

1. The model of the Old Testament

The Old Testament Canon was closed 400 years before Christ came. There were 400 years of silence bore the commencement of the New Testament. This is often referred to as the inter-testamental period. It is important to note also that the Old Testament Canon was accepted immediately by the Lord and his disciples – accepted as closed. It will not come as a surprise then to find that for the most part the same was true of the New Testament.

We will consider this in a later study but for now let me point out that the New Testament was generally accepted as soon as it was written. Peter refers to the writings of Paul (2 Peter 3:15-16) as authoritative – written “by the wisdom given unto him.” Daniel in the Old Testament recognized the writings of his contemporary Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2).

2. The Circumstances of the New Testament

The only Bible that the early Church had was the Old Testament. Peter preached from it in Acts 2; Stephen recounted the Old Testament History in Acts 7 and Philip preached from Isaiah 53 in Acts 8. These people were hearing first hand the life, death and resurrection of Christ (I John 1:1-4) and it drove them back into the Old Testament to see if these things were so or not (Acts 17:11).

Before the beginning of New Testament writing therefore, the apostles and disciples had two sources to work from – the Old Testament and the life of Christ. They preached the story of Christ for almost twenty years and encouraged the people looked into the Old Testament to see that this story was the fulfillment of the prophetic Word of God. It was natural that they would want an authentic record of this which is what Luke states at the beginning of his Gospel. The written Word was a natural addition to the spoken word – a written record of the life of Christ. In addition to this it was important to put into writing what was being taught by the apostles.

There are two stages of the revelation in the New Testament⁵ and these two stages are complete in themselves. Christ refers to these in his great prayer of John 17 (verses 8 and 20). The first stage was that which is given by Christ during His ministry on earth (John 17:8). The second, was that which was given to the apostles for the establishing of the Church (John 17:20 cf. Acts 2:42; Jude 17).

The second stage of New Testament revelation was given by the Holy Spirit. Here the Spirit, which was given after Christ’s ascension, continued what Christ had begun. There were things that the apostles were not ready to receive before the resurrection (John 16:12). When Christ had ascended to glory the promised Spirit completed that revelation and led them into “all truth” (emphasis added – John 14:26, 15:26-27; 16:12-14). In these Scriptures the Lord tells his disciples that they will be given “all” that is necessary for the establishment and continuance of the Church.

⁵ Bernard, Thomas Dehany, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, 1896 reprint (Minnesota: Klock and Klock, 1978), 34-35.

It is important to notice also, at this point, that as the New Testament developed it was not abstracted from experience. The New Testament was written through the experience of the apostles—the normal routine of Church life, theological controversies, ecclesiastical discipline and personal trials (*cf.* I Corinthians 7:6). As the Church continues therefore it can be confident that it has “all truth” for the life of the Church—every eventuality is covered.

3. The Teaching of the New Testament

a. The Foundation of the Church has been Laid (Ephesians 2:19-20)

In this passage Paul is speaking of the revelation of truth. Christ is the Truth, the Corner Stone of revelation. The apostles and prophets are the foundation—those to revealed the truth. In this passage Paul is saying that the Church is built on the foundation (the revelation of Christ) given by the prophets and apostles.

This revelation—the complete New Testament is part of the foundational stage of the Church.⁶ A foundation is for building on. The Church is the superstructure built on a foundation as Paul goes on to say (Verse 21). The building of the Church cannot be a “continued foundation.”

The foundation then is “apostles and prophets”—in that order. This order is important. It is not a chronological order (i.e. the New Testament Apostles and the Old Testament Prophets). This is a hierarchical order (the New Testament apostles and those associated with them). Here then are two categories of men who were used in the writing of the New Testament—the apostles and those associated with them.

This order is confirmed by Paul in the next chapter (3:5). There Paul is speaking of the revelation of God specifically to the Gentiles (3:1). In other ages God spoke to the Jews (Romans 3:2), but the mystery is “now [in the New Testament era] revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.”

b. The Faith of the Church has been Settled (Jude 1:3)

Right at the beginning of his epistle Jude tells us his purpose for writing (verses 3-4). There were men creeping into the Church who were denying the faith and leading the Church away from the foundation that the apostles had laid (*cf.* Vs. 17). Jude points his readers back the foundation of the apostles and affirms that this settles the discussion on the Christian faith—we have “the faith once delivered.” Every word in this little phrase is important.

This is the Objective Faith. This is not the personal subjective faith of the individual that was delivered. Jude is speaking of the corpus of truth, the faith. Paul preached this “Faith” as the body of truth, or the system of Christianity (*cf.* Galatians 1:23 “*preaching the faith*”).

This is the “Once-for-all” Faith. the word *once* here would be better translated *once for all time* “in the sense that it was then complete, and would not be repeated.”⁷ This is the same

⁶ Masters, Peter, *The Charismatic Phenomenon*, (London: The Wakeman Trust, 1992), 43.

⁷ Barnes, Albert, *Notes on the New Testament*. 11 Vols. (London: Blackie and Sons, n.d.), 10:387.

word that is used in Hebrews 9:26-28 to speak of the completed work of Christ's atonement. Jude therefore teaches us that Christ, the Word of God (John 1:1) is complete in the same way that the work of Christ is complete (John 1:14). There is no more sacrifice for sin and there is no more revelation needed.

This is the Official Faith. Right at the beginning of the New Testament Church there were "certain men" distorting the word of God, abusing the doctrines of grace and denying the Lord Christ. They were bringing in, to use the words of Peter "damnable heresies" (2 Peter 2:1). Jude writes to counter these heresies and exhorts the church to defend the faith that was once for all "delivered." The word *delivered* here is an aorist passive participle. The aorist tense is a simple past tense equivalent to past perfect. This shows that it is an act committed in the past with no continuing element. In other words; this faith "has been delivered." But this verb is also a passive, which shows that the "faith was not discovered by men but was delivered to men by God."⁸

The Bible that we have is no "Community Canon"⁹ – the selection determined by a particular community or a human anthology – it is the authoritative word of God "delivered" by God Himself to His Church, authorized by Him and completed by Him. The Church can be confident, therefore, "*that its New Testament is complete; there is nothing included that should be excluded, nothing missing that should be included*"¹⁰

⁸ MacArthur, John, *Charismatic Chaos*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 62.

⁹ Peckham, John C. *The Canon and Biblical Authority: A Critical Comparison of Two Models of Canonicity*. Trinity Journal 28:2 (Fall 2007), 230-249.

¹⁰ Gaffin, Richard B. *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 179