

Sermon Subject: WHO CLOSED THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE?

SCRIPTURE: John 14:15-18, 25, 26; John 16:13

If ye love me keep my commandments, And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; Even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him; but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless; I will come unto you These things have I spoken unto you, being yet present with you. But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father shall send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you He shall guide you into all truth.

Man shall not live by bread only; but by every word that proceedeth (present tense) out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.

One of the most popular and widespread of all beliefs among Christian people is the belief that the Bible is a closed book, complete in itself, undisputed as to authority, never to be added to or taken away from; or in other words, that the canon of scripture is closed for all time; that in the Bible is contained everything which is essential or desirable or necessary for man's salvation. The fact that this is a widespread and popular belief does not necessarily make it true. There was a time when everybody not only believed, but KNEW that the world was flat; but the world was round just the same.

Who closed the canon of scripture? Perhaps it would be wise to begin our discussion with a brief examination of how the Bible came to us -- how the 66 books now comprising it came to be selected and approved as sacred literature. Concerning the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible, there seems to have been little doubt -- probably because they are so old that no one in more recent historic times ever thought to question them. Some of the other Old Testament books did not fare so happily. At various times there have been doubts expressed about all the minor prophets, about Ezekiel, Esther, Jonah, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. The selection of books which appeared in the Septuagint translation helped to stabilize the accepted canon of scripture. The Septuagint translation of the Old Testament was made between 250 and 150 B.C., and was probably the Bible used by Jesus and his apostles. It contained several apocryphal books which are still found in the Catholic Bible, but have been dropped from the Protestant versions -- books such as Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and I and II Maccabees. The Septuagint version and the Catholic Bible also add more than six chapters to the common version of Esther, and some 66 verses to the third chapter of Daniel.

The point is that even up until the time of Christ -- more than four hundred years after the Book of Malachi was written -- there was still debate and argument about what constituted the Old Testament canon of scripture, and that that difference of opinion still continues today as evidenced by the differences between the Catholic and Protestant versions of the Old Testament. Two councils of Jewish rabbis were held at Jamnia, in 90 A.D. and 118 A.D. to discuss the question of which books should be included in the Old Testament canon. The rival rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai were there brought together in agreement, and the limits of the Hebrew canon officially and finally determined by the highest Jewish authority.

Another fact worthy of note is that it was the uniform tradition of this time that prophetic inspiration had ceased with Malachi, about 445-432 B.C., and that

it was because prophecy had ceased, that the canon of scripture was closed. Those Jewish scholars who held to this theory were among the most bitter enemies of Christianity, which began to regard various new writings as scripture, and read them in their worship along with the writings of the Old Testament. During the Christian persecutions, it was not at all unusual for both Roman and Jewish persecutors (such as Paul, or Saul before his conversion) to search out the various epistles or documents which were cherished by a Christian congregation, and burn them as heretical, on the theory that the gift of prophecy had ceased and the canon of scripture was closed.

When the actual work of writing the New Testament scriptures began, no single writer had any idea that his work would some day be included in the book we know as the Bible. All of the New Testament writers looked for "the end of the world" to come momentarily. Their words were not written to be preserved for all time, but to meet the immediate needs in the lives of those with whom they were associated. And yet these incidental writings have come to be our most valued and most sacred literature.

We can be absolutely certain of one thing; that we do not have nearly all of the material that we ought to have about the life of Christ. All scholars are agreed that Mark's gospel was written first, and that Matthew and Luke both drew upon it as primary source material. But they are also agreed that there was another unknown source upon which both Matthew and Luke drew for material; and furthermore that Matthew probably had still a third source which was not familiar to Luke, and that Luke had still a fourth source which was unfamiliar to Matthew. John ignored a large share of all this material, and seemingly used still different sources of his own to write the gospel of John. Have we then all of the writings about the life of Christ? What happened to the others? In I Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul quotes from some unknown source a vivid description of the last supper which is not contained in any of the four gospels; and in Acts 20:35 there is a quotation, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," ascribed to Jesus -- but this saying is not recorded in any of the four gospels. If by some quirk of fate a genuine manuscript containing one or both of these fragments should be unearthed today, would the church be willing to include it in the canon of scripture? If not, why not? Is the canon of scripture closed, and if so, who closed it, leaving so much material on the outside to be lost to future generations?

Until the close of the fourth century after Christ there was a more or less continuous discussion among the early church fathers as to what were and what were not canonical books. Justin Martyr, who died in 165 A.D., accepted the four gospels, Revelation, Acts, six Pauline epistles, Hebrews (whose authorship was regarded as doubtful) and I John -- no more. A fragment of manuscript known as the Muratorian Fragment, dating from the second century, lists the books of the New Testament, but makes no mention of Hebrews, I and II Peter, or James. Origen, who lived from 185 to 254 A.D. accepted the gospels, the Pauline Epistles, Acts, Hebrews (although he did not think Paul had written it) Revelation, and Jude, but was not sure of James, II Peter, or II and III John. Eusebius, 270-340 A.D., lived in the midst of the last great persecution of the Christians, when books were consigned to the flames wholesale, and men had to know which books to stand for. Eusebius accepted the four gospels, Acts, and the Pauline epistles, in which he included Hebrews. He was doubtful about James, Jude, II Peter, II John, and Revelation. Both the Palestinian and the Syrian churches continued for some little time to reject the Apocalypse, or the Book of Revelation; and the church in Egypt rejected all the so-called "catholic" epistles; that is, those addressed to the church at large, and not to some particular congregation. We have given you these somewhat dull facts to illustrate this point: that up until the end of the fourth century the question of what was canonical scripture

and what was not was still quite unsettled, and subject to numerous differences of opinion.

Various church councils tackled this problem of what was to be regarded as scripture. In 363 A.D. the council of Laodicea in Asia Minor forbade the reading of uncanonical books, and gave a list of those approved. The Council of Hippo in Africa, 393 A.D. lists our present 27 New Testament books as approved scripture. In the year 397 A.D. the Council of Carthage decreed: "Aside from the canonical scriptures nothing is to be read in Church under the name of Divine Scriptures," and proceeded to give a list of the accepted writings of books in an attempt to secure unanimity.

But still there persisted in some quarters doubts concerning the catholic epistles written by James, Peter, John, and Jude, and concerning Hebrews and Revelation. Good and earnest men were still not sure whether these should be added to or taken away from their collections of Scripture. When the emperor Constantine gave to Eusebius the task of preparing fifty copies of the Divine Scriptures, this was a considerable step in settling the question. Before Eusebius could copy the scriptures, he had to know what was and what was not scripture. He was governed by the wishes of his employer, Constantine, as well as by the Church Councils, in making his selection. It was this officially compiled book of scripture, sponsored by the emperor, which probably did more than any other one effort to give clear title of authenticity to the twenty-seven books that now make up our New Testament canon of scripture.

Now to answer the question propounded at the beginning of this sermon: "who closed the canon of scripture? The answer is that men closed it -- presumptuously, without the sanction of Deity, and under the false and erroneous impression that the age of prophecy had ended for all time, and that God would no longer speak to men, or cause his words to be written. They closed it on the assumption that they had included in the Bible all the writings that were of proved inspiration or that were worth preserving. But today we are wishing that someone had preserved much more. Today we are by no means sure that we have in the Bible everything that should be there. As we have said, we know nothing of the sources from which Matthew, Mark, and John drew their materials, but we have good reason to suspect that there was much more than has been preserved to us. There are twenty-one sacred books or writings specifically mentioned by the Bible writers themselves which are completely lost to us without a trace. We know nothing of Jesus' life from age 12 to age 30.

The Jewish fathers in their councils at Jamnia in 90 A.D. and 118 A.D. had closed the canon of scripture -- as they thought -- for all time, because prophecy has ceased with Malachi. But more scripture was written to form the New Testament. Constantine, and later the Council of Carthage in 397 A.D., presumed to close the New Testament Canon of scripture, assuming that the age of prophecy was past, and that no more scripture had been written or ever would be written.

Men closed the canon of scripture, not God. Men cut the lines of communication from God to man, not God. It was men who asserted that God would never speak to men any more -- not God. I believe that I have a fair knowledge of scripture, but I have never been able to find a single verse in all the Bible in which God says that he has finished writing his scriptures and will no longer speak to men. And at this point, I can almost hear some of my listeners saying, "Has he never read the closing verses of the Book of Revelation which put a curse on any man who adds to the word of God?" Certainly I have read them many times. But I know that similar curses were pronounced in Deuteronomy 4:2, Deuteronomy 12:32, Proverbs 30:6, and Ecclesiastes 3:14 -- but God went on writing scripture just the same. If a commandment not to add to the word of God meant to stop writing scripture, why doesn't the Bible stop at Deuteronomy 4:2?

Let us look at those verses in question -- the closing verses of the Book of Revelation, and of the Bible. "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book; and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

I have stressed certain words in this reading because I want you to note two things. First, that John says absolutely nothing about God adding to or taking away from the words of this book. God has never relinquished his right to add to his own scriptures at any time he pleases. His prohibition is against any man's doing it. Second, that when John prohibited additions to "this book" he was obviously not talking about the Bible at all, but about the Book of Revelation -- the Book of this prophecy. John was writing in 97 A.D. At that time the Bible as a book was unknown. Three hundred years later the question of the canon of scripture was still being argued, and the Council of Carthage had to pronounce on it again. In these verses John is forbidding unauthorized, humanly-inspired additions to or subtractions from the word of God -- as contained in his own book of Revelation. He had no intention whatsoever of forbidding God from making further additions to the body of scripture at any future date when he chose to restore the gift of prophecy, as he had restored it some four hundred years after Malachi.

Then who closed the canon of scripture? Men -- not God. And the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, the same unchangeable, impartial, eternal God can still speak to men through his Spirit as he spoke to prophets in ancient times, and by the Spirit cause them to write scripture for the edification, instruction, reproof, counsel, and correction of his children. Are you losing the benefit, strength, and instruction of such modern scripture because you have been led to believe that the canon of scripture is closed for all time? Then we invite you to reconsider your position in the light of what we have said today, and to be with us next week as we discuss the subject, CONTEMPORARY SCRIPTURES.