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Question 33 - Is the 66-Book Biblical Canon completed and closed?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

33. Is the 66-Book Biblical Canon completed and closed?

The question may be answered by both a no and yes response:

- A. Hypothetically and theoretically . . . no. Although all known evidence would seem to be a trillion to one against it, it remains nevertheless theoretically possible that God may, through some totally unexpected circumstances and for some hitherto inconceivable reason, suddenly decide to add a sixty-seventh book to the canon prior to Christ's return.
- B. Practically and realistically . . . yes. This is concluded by a three-fold line of evidence.

- 1. Scriptural evidence

Dr. Robert Lightner writes:

"The first reason is stated in two passages of Scripture. Jude 3 refers to *the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*, a body of truth more authoritative than one's personal belief. When Jude wrote his epistle, the only books not yet written were those of John. John then warned against adding to or taking from the prophecy of this book (Rev. 22:18-19). This warning applies to the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible and the culmination of God's recorded revelation. Therefore John's warning seems to apply to all Scripture and relates to the matter of canonicity.

"As for the Old Testament canon, Christ accepted the same books received by the Jews of his day. He referred to the first and last books of the Jewish canon in one breath (Matt. 23:35; Lk. 11:51), indicating his acceptance of its entirety. So this canon was clearly closed by Jesus' time." (*Evangelical Theology*, pp. 21-22)

- 2. Historical evidence

Norm Geisler observes:

"The immediate successors of the apostles did not claim new revelation, nor did they claim special confirmatory gifts. In fact, they looked on the apostolic revelations as full and final. When new cults have arisen since the time of the apostles, their leaders have claimed to be apostles in order that their books could gain recognition. Historically, the canon is closed with the 27 books written in the apostolic period. They alone are and have been the books of the canon through all the intervening centuries. No other non-apostolic books have been accepted since the earliest centuries, and no new books written by the apostles have come to light. In His providence, God

has guided the church in the preservation of all the canonical books.” (*A General Introduction to the Bible*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1991, pp. 217-218)

3. Providential evidence

What if a truly prophetic or apostolic book were found today, would it belong in the canon? Of course, the question is only hypothetical, and so the answer is only hypothetical, too. But it is an interesting question, and it does focus an important issue not yet stressed: *the providence of God*. It seems highly unlikely that God would have inspired a book He did not preserve. Why should He give a revelation for the church but not provide for the preservation of it? It is understandable that God might give special guidance to certain individuals, which He did not deem necessary to do for the broader body of believers. But to provide instruction in the Christian faith by way of a revelation He did not preserve for others is another matter altogether. (ibid, p. 217)

In regard to an almost-certainly closed canon, consider another (but similar) question: “Is it possible for a believer to live a sinless life following his or her salvation?” This question also involves a yes and no answer.

1. Hypothetically and theoretically . . . yes – There is no doubt whatsoever that God provides the needed supernatural power for every Christian to defeat all his enemies, to conquer every temptation, to be victorious over every sin, to experience total and continuous spiritual success. The following verses give testimony to this available and adequate power over sin: Rom. 6:1-14; 1 Cor. 10:13; 15:57; Phil. 4:13.
2. Practically and realistically . . . no – To boast of sinless perfection is to claim that which Paul, John, and James could not and would not claim for themselves.
 - Paul’s testimony (Phil. 3:12; 1 Tim. 1:15)
 - John’s testimony (1 John 1:8)
 - James’ testimony (James 3:2)

Theologian Wayne Grudem overviews the various elements in the canon’s completion as follows:

- “Should we expect any more writings to be added to the canon? The opening sentence in Hebrews puts this question in the proper historical perspective, the perspective of the history of redemption: ‘*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the world*’ (Heb. 1:1-2).

“The contrast between the former speaking ‘of old’ by the prophets and the recent speaking ‘in these last days’ suggests that God’s speech to us by his Son is the culmination of his speaking to mankind and is his greatest and final revelation to mankind in this period of redemptive history. The exceptional greatness of the revelation that comes through the Son, far exceeding any revelation in the old covenant, is emphasized again and again throughout chapters 1 and 2 of Hebrews. These facts all indicate that there is a finality to the revelation of God in Christ and that once this revelation has been completed, no more is to be expected.

“But where do we learn about this revelation through Christ? The New Testament writings contain the final, authoritative, and sufficient interpretation of Christ’s work of redemption. The apostles and their close companions report Christ’s words and deeds and interpret them with absolute divine authority. When they have finished their writing, there is no more to be added with the same absolute divine authority. Thus, once the writings of the New Testament apostles and their authorized companions are completed, we have in written form the final record of everything that God wants us to know about the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and its meaning for the lives of believers for all time. Since this is God’s greatest revelation for mankind, no more is to be expected once this is complete. In this way, then, Heb. 1:1-2 shows us why no more writings can be added to the Bible after the time of the New Testament. The canon is now closed.

“A similar kind of consideration may be drawn from Rev. 22:18-19: ‘I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book, If any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book: And if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.’

“The primary reference of these verses is clearly to the book of Revelation itself, for John refers to his writing as ‘the words of the prophecy of this book’ in verses 7 and 10 of this chapter (and the entire book is called a prophecy in Rev. 1:3). Furthermore, the reference to ‘the tree of life and . . . the holy city, which are described in this book’ indicates that the book of Revelation itself is intended.

“It is, however, not accidental that this statement comes at the end of the last chapter of Revelation, and that Revelation is the last book in the New Testament. In fact, Revelation has to be placed last in the canon. For many books, their placement in the assembling of the canon is of little consequence. But just as Genesis must be placed first (for it tells us of creation), so Revelation must be placed last (for its focus is to tell us of the future and God’s new creation).

- “How do we know, then, that we have the right books in the canon of Scripture we now possess? The question can be answered in two different ways. First, if we are asking upon what we should base our confidence, the answer must ultimately be that our confidence is based on the faithfulness of God. We know that God loves his people, and it is supremely important that God’s people have his own words, for they are our life (Deut. 32:47; Mt. 4:4). They are more precious, more important to us than anything else in this world. We also know that God our Father is in control of all history, and he is not the kind of Father who will trick us or fail to be faithful to us or keep from us something we absolutely need.

“The severity of the punishments in Rev. 22:18-19 that come to those who add to or take from God’s words also confirms the importance for God’s people of having a correct canon. There could be no greater punishments than these, for they are the punishments of eternal judgment. This shows that God himself places supreme value on our having a correct collection of God-breathed writings, no more and no less. In the light of this fact, could it be right for us to believe that God our Father, who controls all history, would allow all of his church for almost two thousand years to be deprived of something he himself values so highly and is so necessary for our spiritual lives?

- “Yet one further historical fact should be mentioned. Today there exist no strong candidates for addition to the canon and no strong objections to any book presently in the canon. Of those writings that some in the early church wanted to include in the canon, it is safe to say that there are none that present-day evangelicals would want to include.
- “At this point someone may ask a hypothetical question about what we should do if another one of Paul’s epistles were discovered, for example. Would we add it to Scripture? This is a difficult question, because two conflicting considerations are involved. On the one hand, if a great majority of believers were convinced that this was indeed an authentic Pauline epistle, written in the course of Paul’s fulfillment of his apostolic office, then the nature of Paul’s apostolic authority would guarantee that the writing would be God’s very words (as well as Paul’s), and that its teachings would be consistent with the rest of Scripture. But the fact that it was not preserved as part of the canon would indicate that it was not among the writings the apostles wanted the church to preserve as part of Scripture. Moreover, it must immediately be said that such a hypothetical question is just that: hypothetical. It is exceptionally difficult to imagine what kind of historical data might be discovered that could convincingly demonstrate to the church as a whole that a

letter lost for over 1,900 years was genuinely authored by Paul, and it is more difficult still to understand how our sovereign God could have faithfully cared for his people for over 1,900 years and still allowed them to be continually deprived of something he intended them to have as part of his final revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. These considerations make it so highly improbable that any such manuscript would be discovered at some time in the future, that such a hypothetical question really does not merit further serious consideration.

“In conclusion, are there any books in our present canon that should not be there? No. We can rest our confidence in this fact in the faithfulness of God our Father, who would not lead all his people for nearly two thousand years to trust as his Word something that is not. And we find our confidence repeatedly confirmed both by historical investigation and by the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling us to hear God’s voice in a unique way as we read from every one of the sixty-six books in our present canon of Scripture.

“But are there any missing books, books that should have been included in Scripture but were not? The answer must be no. In all known literature there are no candidates that even come close to Scripture when consideration is given both to their doctrinal consistency with the rest of Scripture and to the type of authority they claim for themselves (as well as the way those claims of authority have been received by other believers). Once again, God’s faithfulness to his people convinces us that there is nothing missing from Scripture that God thinks we need to know for obeying him and trusting him fully. The canon of Scripture today is exactly what God wanted it to be, and it will stay that way until Christ returns.”

(Systematic Theology, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, pp. 64, 65, 66, 68)