

# Life Notes

## THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH PART 2 Key Moments and Personalities

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### #28 The Formation of The Bible - Part Two

It is important to understand that the early Church did not hold meetings in order to *decide* what would be in the Bible. They met to *recognize* which letters were inspired. The distinction is huge. The organizing of the Canon was not the work of man, but an acknowledgment of what God had already made clear to the Christian community. The action was taken because heretical teaching was threatening the stability of the churches and undermining her mission.

In about 140 AD, a man named Marcion began to teach, among other things, that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God of the New Testament. The former was unknowable, judgmental, and harsh. The Father of Jesus was loving and gracious. Marcion rejected the Old Testament because the Deity of that Covenant loved only the Jews and sought to destroy other peoples. He also rejected approximately half of the New Testament, which seemed to speak against his views. Though he was renounced in Rome by 144 AD, Marcionite churches began to spring up throughout the empire, especially in North Africa, and continued to flourish well into the fourth century. Marcion idolized Paul, but twisted the teachings of the Apostle to suit his purposes. The Church knew that rejecting the Old Testament would be foolish, destructive and disorienting. The Church took a firm stand against Marcion, embracing and valuing the Old Testament as the foundation of the Christian faith as expressed in the New Testament.

Another man named Montanus (about 150-170 AD), who arose shortly after Marcion, was accused of fostering belief in "New Revelation" through prophetic utterances. Montanus and his followers were so reviled that it is difficult to really get a grip on this movement.

Some feel the Montanists were simply participants in the gift of prophecy, which was clearly a part of the New Testament experience. Others feel that the ecstatic utterances

undermined or even overruled established Scripture. Montanus was eventually excommunicated by the Church and designated a heretic.

Unfortunately, some Christians associate present-day Pentecostals and Charismatics with the Montanus movement. It is important to know that although we believe in the continuing gift of prophecy, we do not elevate present day prophecy to level of Scripture.

So you can see why the house is somewhat divided over Montanus. The controversy occurred early enough in church history that the gifts were still in favor, at least in many circles, and had not been marginalized (although the cooling of the spiritual fire described in the book of Acts was beginning). I have doubts that the true prophetic would have been rejected by most Christians of that era, so there probably was a mixture of the genuine and the counterfeit in the movement. We know that Montanus probably promoted excess and extremes in several doctrinal respects. He did open the door for "continuing revelation." It does seem that whatever was genuine about the Montanist movement was overwhelmingly tainted by extreme views and behavioral legalism.

My belief is that there may have been a resurgence of true spiritual fire, but as so often the case, if participants are not thoroughly and completely grounded in Scripture, error and extremism will prevail. Sometimes the reaction to the error is as damaging as the error itself. Concerned by the potential quenching of spiritual fervor, the reaction to Montanus caused Tertullian to ask how it came to be that the church had "chased the Holy Spirit into a book?"

Regardless of error and fleshly reaction on both sides, the Church must always stand upon Scripture without falling into the trap of cessationism.

Both incidents (Marcion and Montanus) served to solidify respect for the veracity and authority of Scripture over other revelation and illumination.

To help the churches follow the Gospel, the Canon of Scripture was officially recognized.

By the early third century, only a small number of books in our present day New Testament were questioned (primarily Hebrews and Revelation). When Eusebius wrote a century later, he indicated that only 2 Peter, Jude, and 2 and 3 John were questioned. Revelation was accepted by Eusebius, but he added that he did not understand it.

The oldest list is from 190 AD, and included: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Romans, Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, Jude, 1 and 2 John, Revelation, The Apocalypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon. The last two did not remain on the list. So we know that by 190, the Church accepted the idea of Christian Scripture alongside Jewish Scripture. The promise of the first being fulfilled by the second.

The list of 27 New Testament books that we have today was first presented in writing in 367 AD by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, and was confirmed by church councils in Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397.

### **Summary**

- There was a consensus that the Books of the Bible were special and unique. There was a limited number, and the general agreement was that the Canon was complete.
- We learn from the process of Canonization that Christians were fully committed to the Apostolic teachings.
- The accepted Old Testament Canon (with the exception of the Apocrypha) was embraced by the Church. The 39 books from Genesis to Malachi were recognized as the Word of God.
- The additional 27 texts became known as the New Testament.
- The Old Testament is God's plan promised. The New Testament is God's plan completed.

### **Note: Concerning the Apocrypha**

To this day, there is still division among Christians over the disposition of the 12-15 books (depending on how they are grouped) known as the Apocrypha. While these books are rejected by most Protestant groups, they are accepted by both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Believers. Some Jews accept this literature, while others do not.

There were differences of opinion in the early Church concerning these books. Augustine accepted them, influencing the Roman Catholic Church to do so, but the Reformation Protestants did not. Those of us who do not accept the Apocrypha as inspired recognize their value as poetry and history.

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