

How We Got the New Testament

Study Guide

Introduction

The basic question facing us as we look at the historical record is quite simple. Why does our Bible have a New Testament, comprised of only 27 books?

This course will help answer that and other questions such as:

- Were the 27 books in our New Testament always considered special? If not, why did they end up in our Bible?
- Were these the only books valued by the early church? If not, what happened to the rest?
- How much of a role did the “real people” play in this process?
- Did our New Testament gradually emerge, or was it the result of 4th century decisions by bishops and emperors?
- What role did technology play in the formation of our New Testament?

Using dozens of original graphics, this course will help you answer these and many other questions surrounding the formation of the New Testament.

Our presenter, Pr. Greg Kaufmann, was ordained in 1977, and has been studying the formation of the New Testament ever since. Pr. Greg has served as Assistant to the Bishop of the Northwest Synod of WI for the past 20 years and has been the Bible teacher of their Lay School of Ministry, since its founding in 1993.

Featured artist, Janelle Thompson, is a detail oriented creative artist working in watercolor, pen and ink, and wool to create unique images. Along with the illustrations for New Testament class, she has done wildlife art, book illustration and needle felted wool sculptures in hopes of helping people notice the beauty of creation that is all around them. She works from her Mad Cat Studio in northern Wisconsin.

Background for the Leader

We are living in a time of tremendous change where honored institutions and traditions that formed the cultural foundations are being shaken. Church affiliation based on cultural, social or political affinity has become a weakened identity. Being the church in this century requires acknowledging and adapting to new realities. The COVID-19 pandemic epitomizes that need for change and adaptation. The church no longer has home field advantage. That’s why we can feel a kinship with those early followers of Christ.

First century Christians had to invent themselves. They had no mandatory model for designing their life together. They didn’t even agree on whether or not to keep the Scriptures Jesus had used, which they had inherited from the Jewish community (roughly equal to the Old Testament with the Apocrypha).

The first few centuries of growth and development of the church saw the establishment of a common belief, the decision to keep the inherited Scriptures from the Jewish community and to supplement them with the books that eventually form the New Testament, and the creation of structures and disciplines that are still present today. All three of these key trends loom large in this course.

In order to allow you to go deeper into the many issues that impact the development of the New Testament canon, a number of additional resources (power points and PDF files) have been included. The ones that relate to each of the 5 sessions are listed at the end of the session study guide.

In addition, the power point of the images that form the outline of each of the 5 video sessions are included.

Facilitator Preparation

This study guide is written to help participants make connections between the events of history and the dynamics of today's church. In order to facilitate reflection and dialogue among the participants here are some processes to use:

- The facilitator should view the session in advance to prepare for the discussion.
- Double check the equipment the day of the study to make sure that everything is working. Technical difficulties derail even the most enthusiastic group.
- During the viewing make sure that everyone can see the screen and hear the sound. After the viewing, if at all possible, rearrange the seating to a semi-circle or a circle so that participants can see each other to better facilitate conversation.
- Provide name tags and/or have participants introduce themselves before beginning the discussion. Remember that a newcomer is less likely to return if they are not made to feel welcome through some form of introduction or inclusion. Whether a church is large or small, not knowing 'how things are done here' can make a participant feel uncomfortable. The more the facilitator can be clear about the process and hospitality the more comfortable people will feel.
- Use the opening and closing prayers provided or create your own.
- Set ground rules for discussion. If you have a stable group that meets weekly you may only have to mention these the first session. If people move in and out of the group you will have to make these reminders at each session. Many people have the impression that church history is dry and dusty but participants may discover there are some lively issues that still impact us today—and there may be differences of opinion.
 - It is OK and welcome to have differences of opinion—as history shows, it is what we do with those differences that make the difference.
 - If anything personal happens to be shared that information stays in the room unless the person who spoke gives permission to share outside the group.
- Look over the discussion questions and highlight the ones that you want to make sure to cover. Depending on how lively the discussion is you may have to cut down the number of questions you cover.
- If you have more than 12 people in the class you may want to divide the class into small groups for discussion purposes, and then pull the class back together before the end of the session to glean themes from each group.
- The facilitator needs to be prepared to move the discussion on to a new question if the group is stuck and/or to keep any one person from dominating the discussion. One technique in the latter situation is to insert yourself with something like, "That is very interesting. What do some of the rest of you think about this issue?"

Session 1: From Oral to Written: Preparing for the Long Haul

Welcome: Today the Christian church is so familiar with a Bible that has an Old and New Testament, that it rarely, if ever crosses our minds that this wasn't always so. But it wasn't. Jesus never heard of the New Testament. Neither did Paul. In addition to the Jewish Scriptures, during the first 200 years after Christ, a wide variety of both oral and written traditions about Jesus and his meaning for our life circulated among different areas of the church. No attempt was made to limit or categorize them until late in the second century. The next 200 years were spent struggling to limit those traditions to a select few. So, when and how did our New Testament get formed? Our time together during these 5 sessions of this course, will open the historical window to this fascinating and faithful process.

Opening prayer: God, you loved creation into being. You have loved humankind since before there was a church, before there was a Bible. Help us to listen and learn how your Spirit informed, over time, the development of the New Testament that is so central to our life of faith today. Amen

Opening conversation: Share in groups of 2-3. How does your family share memories or stories from one generation to another? i.e. Do you have good storytellers in the family? Does someone make photo albums/books? Is someone a scrapbook maker?

Watch video (16:34)

Synopsis: The first followers of Jesus did what disciples of all philosophical schools did in the Greco-Roman world of the 1st century of the common era (CE). They tried to pass on as accurately as they could the teachings of Jesus. As more and more of the eye witnesses, and those who knew them died, and as the church spread out across that Greco-Roman world, written records of who Jesus was and what Jesus taught and did, emerged. How the early church would continue to use the Scriptures inherited from Judaism, and what it would do with these new documents will be the focus of our next session.

Questions for discussion:

- Before you saw this session, how did you think we got the New Testament?
- Is it surprising to you that only 3 major religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have a closed set of scripture (canon)? Can you imagine having an evolving set of scriptures?
- If the last of the living witnesses to Jesus were dying off, what would you have done to keep the connection to Jesus? (Remember this is before the printing press or the internet or high-speed travel!)

Closing prayer: Gracious God, we give you thanks for giving people of faith the tools we need to grow in faith--a community, worship, service, and scripture. Bless us as we take your love into the world. Amen

Reference material: Greg refers to another course that talks about this whole era. That course is: *By What Authority: Rethinking Early Church History* (www.selectlearning.org).

Power Point: "Greco-Roman World." This material is further explained in the Select Learning course: *Introduction to the World of the New Testament*" (www.selectlearning.org).

PowerPoint: "Session 1"

Handout: "Glossary of Terms"

Session 2: Second Century Developments: Defenders and Detractors of The Rule of Faith

Welcome: In this session, we will meet a number of 2nd century individuals who had differing ideas on how to safeguard the story of Jesus, and prepare to be the church for the long haul. Their “offices” provide you with a summary of their key contributions; this artistic device will be used throughout the remaining sessions.

Opening prayer: God, you love us enough to give us your son, Jesus. Help us learn from the early Christians who poured themselves into continuing and protecting the story and experience of Jesus in the world. Amen

Opening conversation: In groups of 2-3 share what is it like when you and another member of your family don’t remember an event the same way? Have you had that experience?

Watch video (28:58)

Synopsis: Church leaders realized that Jesus’ eagerly anticipated second coming was delayed indefinitely. But they differed on how to respond. Marcion urged a complete break with their Jewish past. Tatian and others advocated a single summary of Jesus’ life and teaching. Ireneaus argued for a 4-Gospel approach.

Questions for discussion:

- What do you use to help you get through adversity (when things aren’t going well)? What do you put your trust in? Friends and family? prayer? Scripture? music?
- In the case of 2nd century Christians, they were struggling with what Scriptures were needed beyond those that Jesus had. (Roughly the Old Testament.) Of the various solutions offered in this session, which was most appealing to you and why? (See reference sheet: 2nd Century Options to Safeguard the Story of Jesus.)
- Ireneaus supports the idea of 4 gospels because they come from churches founded by apostles. He gives great weight to the age of the community and proximity to Jesus. Do those measuring sticks make sense to you? What about new ideas or younger leaders? Isn’t the Spirit promised to all the baptized?

Closing prayer: God of love and life, discerning your will and way was difficult at times for early Christians. It remains difficult at times for us today. Bless us with perseverance, curiosity, compassion, and humility as we live out the questions of faith in our day. Amen

Reference material:

- Handout: “Mark and Peter”
- PowerPoint: “Scripture and Canon: Aren’t They Synonymous?”
- PowerPoint: “Formation of the Old Testament”
- PowerPoint: “Session 2”
- Greg refers to another course that talks about this whole era. That course is: *By What Authority: Rethinking Early Church History* (www.selectlearning.org).
- Glossary of Terms: The various heresies you meet in the course are listed there.

Session 3: Third Century Developments: Apostolic Centers and the Bishops

Welcome: During the 3rd century, it seemed as if everyone was collecting something! As we saw in the previous sessions, we will again see how the church continued to seek ways to stay connected to the authentic stories of who Jesus was, and why Jesus matters for the world. That process proved to be very messy, with different parts of the church coming to different conclusions.

Opening prayer: God we live in a time when new resources are proliferating and we have difficulty tracking, what is good and what is not so good--whether it is podcasts, books, or tv shows. We rely on people or institutions we trust to collect and curate for us. Thank you for those saints who went before us and collected the scriptures that have become our New Testament. Amen

Opening conversation: In groups of 2-3, what is it that feeds your soul? Hymns? Gathering for worship? Service groups? Bible reading or Bible study? Walking in nature? Reading poetry or other literature? Quality conversations with those you love? Making music?

Watch video (20:30)

Synopsis: The battle over retention of the Greek version of the Old Testament ended. The church chose to retain these Scriptures, and spent the 3rd century sorting out the over 100 New Testament writings that had emerged. We will see that agreement didn't come easily, and would take in some cases centuries longer to achieve! Two factors were critical for a NT book's inclusion in the emerging collection: use in worship and effectiveness in study (defending the faith).

Questions for discussion:

- The question of the day was, who has the authority to let the lapsed back into the community? Do we wrestle with this type of issue? Where does the authority lie today when communities have to decide who is welcome?
- Tertullian recognized that having scriptures or even agreeing on them doesn't equal living a Christian life. How do we wrestle with the issue of the difference between having knowledge and living a life of faith?
- In this century, the Eastern part of the church no longer used Revelation and other apocalyptic literature. What is your experience with the book of Revelation?
- In this session we see that the oldest part of the church, the Syrian area, looks very different than the Western and Eastern parts of the church. How does this throw light on conversations and tensions between long time members of congregations/families and newer/younger members of congregations/families?

Closing prayer: Thank you God for the saints who went before us, who did the hard work of collecting, curating, and testing the stories and letters that have become our New Testament. May the same Spirit work through us as we live that good news out in our daily lives of service to others. Amen

Reference material:

- Handout: "Lions Three, Christians Nothing: Persecution and the Formation of the New Testament Canon"
- PowerPoint: "Session 3"
- Handout: "Glossary of Terms"

Session 4: Fourth Century Developments: From Persecution to Patronage

Welcome: In 303 the church experienced the worst persecution in the history of the Roman Empire. Starting in 313, with the Edict of Milan, the church was protected/favored by the empire. Imagine what it would be like to go from having your leaders martyred to having their salaries paid by the empire! Then in 331, the Emperor Constantine asked Eusebius for 50 copies of their sacred Scriptures for the new churches he was paying to have built. In this session we'll see how the church responded to all of these dizzying changes.

Opening prayer: Gracious God, you are our one hope in the midst of constant change. Help us listen and learn from the early Christians who went through dramatic change in the cultures they lived in. Amen

Opening conversation: In groups of 2-3. Have you ever moved? What was it like to be the new kid?

Watch video (24:23)

Synopsis: After 10 years of empire wide persecution, the remaining 2 emperors, Licinius and Constantine, issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, which granted all religions the freedom to practice their faith. But it particularly favored the Christian church, creating many of the structures of what would eventually become the Roman Catholic Church. During the 4th century, people like Eusebius, Athanasius, Jerome and Augustine helped bring the process of forming the New Testament Canon to a close in most parts of the church.

Questions for discussion:

- There were some significant trade offs made when the church moved from being outlier to aligned with empire. How do you see the advantages/disadvantages in those types of alignments in today's religious/political culture?
- Why or how do you think it matters that the contents of what would become the New Testament was discerned over several centuries by usage across the church rather than the result of the emperor's request for 50 copies of the Christian sacred scriptures?
- Once the majority of the New Testament was agreed on, Christian communities discovered that they had different opinions on interpretation. One way to handle that tension was to give power of interpretation to a religious or political leader. There are alternatives. How do you see your community and the church at large handling that tension today?

Closing prayer: Loving Creator, you seem to like diversity, often more diversity than we are comfortable with, whether that is about the interpretation of Scripture or how to manage a crisis in our communities. Help us to be patient with ourselves and each other when unity is hard to find and bless us with your creative Spirit to help us work with our differences. Amen

Reference Materials:

- Handout: "Codex or Scroll"
- PowerPoint: "4th Century Lists"
- PowerPoint: "Persecutions and the Formation of the New Testament"
- PowerPoint: "The Technology of Bookmaking"
- PowerPoint: "Constantine's Impact"
- PowerPoint: "Session 4"
- Handout: "Glossary of Terms"

Session 5: From Lists to a Canon: Technology, Time and Distance Matter

Welcome: This session will bring to a close our detective work about the process of how we got our New Testament. Rather than viewing the offices of important individuals in the process, as we've done in previous sessions, we'll look at the end result of all their centuries of hard work. And we'll draw some conclusions about the process of forming the canon.

Opening prayer: God of hope, help us to learn from the early church. May the long arc of faithful professions of faith that went into forming our New Testament give us patience with ourselves and our communities when we struggle together over matters of faith. Amen

Opening conversation: In groups of 2-3 discuss: How have you experienced technology changing your life--family, work, church, government, leisure....

Watch video (13:59)

Synopsis: Prior to the 4th century, there simply weren't any lists of Sacred Scripture. Now they show up all across the empire. Why? Could it be that for the first time the technology existed enabling the binding of a book as big as a Bible? While not the main focus of a number of church councils called by the emperors during these two centuries, providing a list of New Testament Scripture for use in worship and study, often was included.

Questions for discussion:

- What surprised you about the process of the formation of the New Testament?
- Even though the New Testament was basically agreed on at the end of the 4th century, it would be another 1,000 years before the printing press came and more people began to be able to actually read the Bible. How do you think you would relate to Scripture if you couldn't hold a Bible in your hand and/or read it?
- In this time period, when the world was very politically chaotic, the Philosophical schools, the Jewish rabbis, and the Christian leaders work to discern what are their common or core writings. We are also in a chaotic time. How do you see this impacting the church today?
- Sometimes it took a heresy to help the church decide what it 'really' believed. Have you ever had the experience in your life of bumping up against an event, idea, personal interaction that helped you name and claim what you believe?

Closing prayer: Loving God, thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus. Thank you also for the faithful witness of your people who, over time, did their best to give us access to the stories of Jesus and the letters of his followers. May the gift that we have now of the printed Bible (hard copy or digital) help us to experience the Good News of your love through Jesus and witness to it in the way we live our own lives. Amen

Reference material:

- PowerPoint: "Manuscript Evidence"
- PowerPoint: "Session 5"
- Handout: "Firsts in the Formation of the New Testament"
- Handout: "Glossary of Terms"