

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Telling the New Testament  
Story of God



**SESSION 1**

Why Study the New Testament?

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# Why Study the New Testament?

## SESSION OVERVIEW

### Why Study the New Testament?

### Definitions of Terms Relating to the Bible

### Formation of the New Testament Canon

### Application

### Exam

### Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- know the difference between the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament.
- classify and list the books of the New Testament.
- understand basic terms used in New Testament study.
- demonstrate an awareness of issues relating to the development of the New Testament canon.
- explain why the New Testament canon is trustworthy.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a foundational study for understanding the setting and message of the New Testament. This study will introduce you to the New Testament biblical literature, Bible study methods, and the environment of the Early Church. Special attention will be given to the political, cultural, religious, and geographical setting, the literary genre, and the meaning of the text in its original cultural, historical, and literary context for the purpose of discovering the principles of truth to be applied to our contemporary setting.

## WHY STUDY THE NEW TESTAMENT?



### NOTES

Jews, Christians, and Muslims have been called people of the book. These world religions each have collections of writings which their followers consider to be God's Word and to contain for all time the ultimate standard for faith and practice. For Protestants, sixty-six books or writings are elevated to a special status not allowed for any other texts. These writings are considered uniquely authoritative. Catholics accept an additional twelve books among the Old Testament writings, the Apocrypha. These sixty-six or seventy-eight writings comprise what is known as the canon of Scripture.

### THE BIBLE: A BIG INVESTMENT

Within Christendom, what are some evidences of the importance of the Bible and its message?

*People have died for the Bible.* Not only were the early Christians martyred, but William Tyndale, a 16th-century priest, was executed for translating the Bible into English. In the 20th century, Bible smugglers endangered their lives and Christians living in anti-Christian countries were persecuted and killed. A recent *Christianity Today* magazine has a story of a young boy whose family was killed because they would not deny their Christianity. The little boy was thrown into a fire and left for dead.

*More copies of the Bible have been printed than any other single book.* No one traveling in Africa or Latin America can bring enough Bibles to fill the demand. Even in North America, where Bibles are not scarce, more copies are sold than any other book, including "best sellers."

*The Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, has deeply affected the world we live in.* Few persons would deny that the American legal system is indebted to the Old Testament as represented in the Ten Commandments. Concerning the New Testament, it has been said the impact of the life and teachings of Jesus on world history is so prominent that some knowledge of His life is of importance for anyone in modern society. The symbolism and terminology is entrenched within the everyday aspects of society. One type of Jesus' teachings that has had a particular influence on common language is parables. Such expressions such as acting like a Good Samaritan; leaving things to the eleventh hour; using our talents; or counting the cost are not strange to our ears.


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## THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

*The Old Testament* is the scripture God gave to the Israelites. It is a testimony to God's creation of the world and humanity, the human fall into sin, and God's attempts to reconcile them with himself.

*The Old Testament Apocrypha* is a collection of books written from about 200 BC to AD 100 which contain valuable historical and religious information. They were not accepted into the Jewish canon or by the Protestant churches as divinely inspired. Roman Catholics and some Eastern Orthodox churches do recognize them as Scripture. We will be referring to some of these books, especially 1 and 2 Maccabees, as we review the intertestamental history concerning the period of time between the Old and New Testaments.

*The New Testament* is a testimony of God's reconciliation through Jesus Christ and the creation of His reconciling community, the Church. It is comprised of four primary types of writings including:

- The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). These four Gospels tell the story of Jesus' life on earth from four different viewpoints.
- History (Acts). This book is the only real history book in the New Testament and traces the development of the Early Church from Jesus' ascension to Paul's imprisonment in Rome (ca. AD 30–65).
- *Letters*
  1. Pauline. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Paul's letters were sent to churches and individuals to help them understand what to believe, how to live out this belief, and how this faith related to their community.
  2. Johannine. 1, 2, and 3 John. These three rather short letters of John were sent to churches and an individual (Gaius) encouraging them to be strong in the faith.
  3. General (Catholic). Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude (1, 2 and 3 John usually considered General Epistles). General Epistles are sometimes called Catholic (meaning universal) Epistles or letters. They were written by various Christian leaders to an unspecified audience, perhaps several different churches. They emphasize the superiority of Christianity over Jewish traditions, call for Christians to act out what they believe, and warn against false teachers.


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4. Apocalyptic. Revelation or Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. The Revelation of Jesus Christ is an entirely different book which uses Jewish apocalyptic language (see session 18) and symbols of the period to encourage the early Christians to endure persecution, because God has already won the war. It also warns Christians of the danger of cultural accommodation or becoming too comfortable while living within the broader context of the Greco-Roman world.

## REASONS FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES

From what we have already seen, the study of the Bible is important. Concerning the New Testament, Drs. Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough have suggested three specific reasons why we should study the New Testament.

*It mediates God's presence and God's truth.* What does this statement mean? What do you think about the statement that in the Bible God has given us absolute truth, applicable, anywhere, anytime?

*It is of ultimate personal significance.* What does this statement mean? Why is this an important reason to study the New Testament and proclaim its truths?

*It is foundational to Western cultural literacy.* A further discussion of this point is warranted.

- Jaroslav Pelikan, in his opening statement to *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, says: "Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about Him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure of the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of super magnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of His name, how much would be left? It is from His birth that most of the human race dates its calendars; it is by His name that millions curse and in His name that millions pray."
- Jesus and the New Testament have engaged the minds of many of the western world's great thinkers. Some like the Early Church fathers (leaders in the early church) such as Ignatius, Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine have positively tried to interpret the New Testament and apply its teachings to their own situations.

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Others, seeing historical Christianity as undesirable, like Voltaire and Nietzsche have developed philosophies challenging their understanding of the teachings of the New Testament. Voltaire, a French skeptic, dared ask the question: “How can a good God, allow suffering?” He opposed the intolerance and bigotry he saw in the historical Christianity of his time. Nietzsche, a German thinker, wanted to counter the slave mentality and morality he saw exemplified in the New Testament.

## DEFINITIONS OF TERMS RELATING TO THE BIBLE

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### NOTES

One of the greatest challenges in studying any discipline concerns specialized terminology or particular words that have special significance for that field. In the study of the Bible, the following terms or ideas are of great importance:

*Revelation.* By revelation we mean God's self-disclosure to humanity through His words and actions. This revelation is recorded in the Bible and is based on historical events. Biblical history is best described as a theological understanding of historical events that happened to or around God's people (See 2 Tim. 3:16).

*Inspiration.* When the term "inspiration" is used, it means the involvement of God in the process of communicating His revelation (self-disclosure) and usually refers to its written form. Inspired, or "God-breathed," means the Holy Spirit worked in and through the minds and hearts of His people to produce a trustworthy account of God's truth. While inspiration is affirmed by the Scriptures, the how or nature of inspiration is not agreed upon all. There are three primary understandings or theories relating to inspiration:

- Dictation (Verbal Inspiration). God dictated every word to the human writer. There was no actual involvement of the person (except in a mechanical sense) in the thought process of putting the ideas in written form. Hooker states: "They neither spake nor wrote any word of their own, but uttered syllable by syllable as the Spirit put it into their mouths."
- Guidance of the Holy Spirit (dynamic inspiration). Human writers recorded their understanding of God's self-revelation in their own language and for their specific culture under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is totally and completely inspired (plenary inspiration) because it is the result of a dynamic relationship between God and the human writers.
- Influence of Tradition, Religious Practices, and Biases. Some Christians believe inspiration is the process of human writers recording their understanding of God's revelation under the influence of their religious traditions, biases, and religious thinking. This theory does not generally include the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is a purely rationalistic theory.



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*Authority of Scripture.* Protestant tradition regards Scripture as the only source of the Church's beliefs and practices. This *sola scriptura* principle was adopted by Martin Luther in the Reformation. Our own Wesleyan tradition is based on this, but also recognizes that historic Church tradition, human reason, and human experience are very important to the interpretation of Scripture. We recognize that the Bible has authority because God is the author. The Bible is the record of His self-disclosure.

*Hermeneutics.* Hermeneutics is the science and art of interpretation. It is not a discipline only of concern to students of the Bible. All disciplines from the arts to the sciences are concerned with the interpretation of oral, written, and visual forms of communication. As we greet the world each morning, we are surrounded by a world in need of interpretation and understanding. Each form or type of communication presupposes or requires certain information or tools to discern the message that is being sent forth.

Our interests in this course are centered, however, on biblical interpretation. The technical study of hermeneutics covers the rules and principles used in the practice of biblical interpretation. The goals of hermeneutics are to:

- discover the historical context and meaning of the passage for the original audience.
- translate the content of that original meaning for the contemporary audience.

Hermeneutics, thereby, involves giving attention to the original message or messages being conveyed by the biblical author and asking questions of their significance for the modern world.

*Exegesis.* This is the process by which the modern reader brings out the meaning of the biblical text. In our society, we prize the freedom to speak and be heard rightly. We become disturbed when someone puts words into our mouths that we did not say. Exegesis involves paying respect to what others have said and attempting to discern the message or messages which they were attempting to communicate. This task is foundational for any application of said message or messages to the modern world.

## FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

### NOTES

Where does the term Bible come from? It comes from the port of Byblos in Lebanon. Byblos was known to be an important place for the shipment of papyrus. *Byblos* in the old Greek language originally meant the inner bark of the papyrus plant. Papyrus bark was striped into long pieces, pressed to get the water out, dried in a crisscross pattern, and used for paper in the ancient world. So *byblos* came to be associated with books and then became a specific book, the Bible. The very earliest copies of the New Testament were written on this kind of material.

### THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

*Canon.* The word canon comes from the Greek term *kanon* which originally meant a reed used for measuring. Eventually it came to mean a standard and, in literature, it described a list of works that could be attributed to a certain author. The canon of the New Testament is an authoritative collection of books recognized by the Church as the standard for belief and practice.

While the exact process of the formation of the New Testament canon is obscure, a few factors appear to have contributed to the inclusion of the writings which we now have. These factors include apostolicity, orthodoxy, and catholicity.

*Apostolicity.* All of the New Testament writings were believed to have apostolic connections though not necessarily being written by one of the original twelve apostles (Matthew, John, Peter). They were viewed as being written during the apostolic age by persons closely associated with those considered apostles, including Paul. Some writings were considered to have been written by those closely associated with Jesus himself such as his brothers James and Jude. Because the New Testament was written by at least nine different people, (some apostles, some not, some eye-witnesses, some not) the question of the canonicity of a New Testament book cannot be decided totally on authorship.

*Orthodoxy.* Early Christians believed that the theology and ethics promoted by the New Testament as a whole was coherent even though diversity was recognized. None of the biblical texts were believed to contradict one another.

*Catholicity.* The books included in the New Testament had proven useful for a large number of churches from the earliest generations. They were used widely in public worship. It is important to note that no church council ever decided what books to place within the canon. The councils gave official approval to selections that had already been made.


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The canon, however, cannot be decided solely on the church's acceptance of the books. Some of the books were widely accepted, some were received with hesitation, and some were not accepted at all by some of the early churches. Some scholars indicate that the only true criterion for canonicity is inspiration. Tenny suggests three ways inspiration can be demonstrated:

- *Intrinsic or Internal Context.* The central subject is Christ.
- *Moral Effect.* Reading and following the principles of these books will effect transformation in a person's life.
- *Historic Testimony of the Church.* This indicates the value the community of faith has placed on these books down through the centuries.

### **AUTHORITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MESSAGE**

The belief that the Bible communicates much more than simply human words and, thereby, is authoritative has both internal and external support.

*Internal Testimony.* The New Testament itself testifies to the authority of the message.

- References indicating the Old Testament is the Word of God: 2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; Heb. 8:8; Acts 28:25.
- References which talk about the teachings of Jesus as a word of the Lord: 1 Cor. 9:9, 13-14; 1 Thess. 4:15; 1 Cor. 7:10, 25.
- References to the fact that certain information was received directly from God, by divine revelation: Gal. 1:1, 12; 1 Thess. 2:13.
- References that acknowledge Paul's letters as authoritative: 2 Pet. 3:15-16.

*External Testimony.* The Early Church fathers and leaders recognized the canonicity of the New Testament books.

- *Informal Witnesses:* By informal we mean the casual use of the books of the New Testament by Early Church fathers. These quotations testify to the existence and authority of the books at the time of the writing by the Early Church fathers.
  1. The earliest document to quote any of the books of the New Testament was 1 Clement, written from Rome to the church in Corinth and is usually dated about AD 95. It contains allusions to Hebrews, 1 Corinthians, Romans, and the Gospel of Matthew.


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2. Ignatius of Antioch in Syria (AD 116) knew all of Paul's letters, quoted Matthew and possibly John.
  3. Polycarp of Smyrna (AD 150) knew Paul's letters, Matthew, and quotes from 1 Peter and 1 John and alludes possibly to Acts.
  4. The *Didache* (AD 100-150) used Matthew, Luke, and many other New Testament books in its attempt at a catechism or discipleship course.
  5. By Irenaeus' time (AD 170) there was no question the books of the New Testament were authoritative. The growth of Gnosticism and other heresies forced a flood of apologetic literature that continued until the time of Origen (AD 250). This literature carefully outlined which books were orthodox and which were not.
- Formal Lists. These are the official lists of New Testament books accepted by groups of Christians or Church Councils. Examples include:
    1. Canon of Marcion (AD 140). This canon was developed by Marcion, an Early Church heretic, who was anti-Jewish and selected books that would be free from Jewish influences. His New Testament canon consisted of Luke and 10 letters of Paul, all except the Pastoral Epistles.
    2. Muratorian Canon (fragment copy from about AD 170). This early orthodox canon included: 4 Gospels, Acts, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Romans, Philemon, Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, Jude, 1, 2, and 3 John, Revelation. It did not mention James, Hebrews, or Peter's letters.
  - The Councils. An official council was a formal discussion by delegates of the Church. The earliest council we know of which dealt with the issue of canon is the Council of Laodicea (AD 363). The council decreed only canonical books of the New Testament should be read in the Church. The extant document contains a definitive list, but most scholars do not think it is genuine. They think it was revised based on later council decisions.

The earliest council listing the present 27 books of the New Testament was the Third Council of Carthage in AD 397, which is usually cited as the date for the closing of the New Testament canon. The Council of Hippo in AD 419 gave the same list.

 **NOTES**

The canon, then, is not the product of any one person's arbitrary judgment, nor was it set by councilor vote. It was the outcome of the use of various writings that proved their merits and their unity by their inward dynamic. Some were recognized more slowly than others because of the smallness of their size, their remote or private destination or anonymity of the authorship, or their seeming lack of applicability to the immediate ecclesiastical need. None of these factors mitigates against the inspiration of any one of these books, or against its right to its place in the authoritative Word of God.

## APPLICATION

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### NOTES

1. Read the introductory sections to the Bible and New Testament found in any good study Bible. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (with Apocrypha)* is suggested. It is a *New Revised Standard Version* with extensive historical, cultural, and geographical notes as well as very adequate maps. The Harper Collins Study Bible and New Interpreter's Study Bibles are also recommended. Each of these Bibles includes the *New Revised Standard Version*. Also consider the *Reflecting God Study Bible* which is a *New International Version* with commentary and resources.
2. Look up the Council of Jamnia (AD 90) and the Council of Carthage (AD 397) in an encyclopedia or on the Internet to learn about the background, sponsorship, and decisions of these councils.
3. Memorize the books of the New Testament in order.

## EXAM



### NOTES

1. All Protestants agree that sixty-six books or writings should be elevated to a status not allowed for any other texts.
  - A. True
  - B. False
2. Philemon is recognized as a \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Pauline letter
  - B. apocryphal writing
  - C. General Epistle
  - D. apocalyptic writing
3. As generally agreed upon by the Church, the process of inspiration involved God dictating every word of Scripture to human authors.
  - A. True
  - B. False
4. Each of the following except \_\_\_\_\_ is understood as being sources of the Church's beliefs and practices.
  - A. human reason
  - B. the Scriptures
  - C. human experience
  - D. cultural trends
5. Hermeneutics is of concern only to the interpreter of Scripture.
  - A. True
  - B. False
6. Exegesis involves the process of reading and understanding the Scriptures in accordance with the theological stances of particular faith communities or denominations.
  - A. True
  - B. False
7. Scholars agree that all the writings in the New Testament were written either by one of the original twelve apostles or by Paul.
  - A. True
  - B. False

 **NOTES**

8. Through much discourse and debate, the books that comprise the New Testament were eventually decided upon by church councils.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
9. Early Christians recognized that New Testament authors differed greatly concerning theology and ethics.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
10. The earliest reference to any of the books of the New Testament from an outside source is found in \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. a letter by Polycarp of Smyrna
  - B. the Didache
  - C. 1 Clement
  - D. a work by Ignatius of Antioch in Syria
  
11. The earliest church council listing the present 27 books of the New Testament was the \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. Council of Nicaea (AD 325)
  - B. Council of Laodicea (AD 363)
  - C. Third Council of Carthage (AD 397)
  - D. Council of Hippo (AD 419)
  
12. Internal Evidence for the authority of Scripture comes from early church fathers or leaders such as Irenaeus and Ignatius of Antioch in Syria.
  - A. True
  - B. False



## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. What are some of the ways the Bible has affected your world?
2. How do versions of the Bible used by Protestants and Catholics differ?
3. What are the four major types of writings in the New Testament? Discuss the classification of specific writings.
4. Discuss hermeneutics as it relates to everyday life and the study of Scripture.
5. Relate the task of exegesis to that of a journalist.
6. If you asked a friend, “Do you believe in the inspiration of Scripture,” and they said “yes” would you necessarily share the same understanding? Why or why not?
7. What gives you confidence the Scriptures are inspired by God?
8. Relate the concept of inspiration to that of authority.
9. What are some primary factors that led to the development of the New Testament canon? What factors are most significant to you?