

How We Got the Bible

Session 3: How We Got the New Testament

Get This: The testimony in the New Testament is trustworthy: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.”—1 Corinthians 15:3-6

Session 3 Outline: *Follow along with the video and take notes!*

1. When was the New Testament written? [Note: Paul’s letters are not arranged chronologically; instead, they go from longest to shortest (Romans-Philemon).]
 - a. Paul’s letter to the Galatians (AD 49)
 - b. 1 and 2 Thessalonians (early AD 50s)
2. Oral histories of Jesus:
 - a. Stories were shared in a culture of memorization.
 - b. Believers cared deeply about preserving the message of eyewitnesses.
 - i. Luke (Luke 1:2)
 - ii. Papias (1st century AD)
 - iii. Pastor disciplined for fabricating stories about Paul in “Acts of Paul” (AD 160)
 - c. Oral histories were written down before eyewitnesses passed away (1 Corinthians 15:3–8).
3. Why did Christians write the New Testament texts?
 - a. Letters to address specific issues in churches
 - b. Loss of eyewitnesses
4. The four Gospels
 - a. Mark was the apostle Peter’s translator.
 - b. Matthew likely wrote in Aramaic; translated into Greek.
 - c. Luke investigated and got stories from eyewitnesses.
 - d. John was an eyewitness.

Key Terms

Autographs

The original manuscripts of the Bible in their final form are known as the *autographs*. The autographs of the New Testament decayed into dust centuries ago—but there is some evidence that the autographs might have survived at least until the end of the second century.

Gospel

(from Old English *godspel*, translation of Greek *euangelion*, “good news”)

(1) gospel: Outside the New Testament in the first century AD, the word translated “gospel” referred to the proclamation of an event—such as a victory in battle or the rise of a new king—that changed the hearer’s status and called for a response. In the New Testament, “gospel” came to mean the proclamation that the power of God’s kingdom had entered human history through Jesus Christ to renew the whole world by means of his perfect life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection. When we [by God’s grace] trust what Jesus did—instead of what we can do—to be made right with God, God restores us to union with himself and communion with others [who are in Christ].

(2) Gospel: A text that narrates the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The four New Testament Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—are ancient biographies (Greek, *bioi*) and were clearly intended to be read as historical testimonies.

New Testament

The second part of the Christian Bible, which announces the fulfillment of God’s Old Testament promises and the arrival of God’s kingdom on earth through the perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ. The New Testament was originally written in Greek. “Testament” translates a Greek word that can also be rendered “covenant” (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:8–13).

Oral Culture

A culture in which stories and memories are recalled and shared primarily through spoken words instead of written words. In the oral culture of the first Christians, rhythmic patterns and mnemonic devices [which helped in remembering] were woven into oral histories so that learners could quickly convert spoken testimonies into permanent memories. God worked through this cultural pattern to preserve the truths that we read today in the New Testament.

Oral Histories

Spoken testimonies which were memorized and shared in communities during the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses.

Power Point:

1. Jesus
2. Followers of Jesus / NT Writers

Group Discussion:

1. Compared to other ancient historical writings, the New Testament books were written not long after the events they describe—during the lifetime of eyewitnesses, in fact! Why do you think these eyewitness accounts are criticized and mistrusted by secular historians, even though other ancient eyewitness testimonies are accepted without question? _____
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2. The Gospel is historically trustworthy. How does this truth impact your everyday life? _____

3. Early Christians cared deeply about preserving and passing on the message of the eyewitnesses. Does your own life reflect that same passion? What are some things you can do to help more people hear or read this message? _____

Hear God’s Word: 1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Study Notes:

- Sixteenth-century church reformer Martin Luther claimed that if anyone rejects the resurrection of Jesus, “he must deny in a lump the Gospel and everything that is proclaimed of Christ and of God. For all of this is linked together like a chain. . . . Whoever denies this article must simultaneously deny far more . . . that God is God” (Commentary on 1 Corinthians).
- The phrase, “resurrection of the dead” (one might also translate this phrase as “the standing of dead ones”) meant just that! The notion of a spiritual (non-physical) resurrection—an idea that appeals to so many today—would have been incomprehensible to first-century Jews.
- Notice that Paul does not argue for the reality of Jesus’ resurrection here; he assumes it for the purpose of a larger argument. How did Paul know the event was indeed real? It was part of the eyewitness testimony he received after (or at the time of) his conversion (15:3). “Paul establishes that it was something he received and passed on to them like a baton. He stresses the continuity of tradition. ‘Among the first things’ means ‘the most important things,’ or ‘things of first importance.’ What was first in importance was also probably spoken first.” (David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI:Baker Academic, 2003], 683.)
- To drive home the point about the reliability of Paul’s claim, see 1 Corinthians 15:5–8, where he points any potential resurrection doubters in the direction of countless eye witnesses who were still alive. The central claim of the New Testament is that Jesus was physically resurrected after being crucified. If this claim grew from decades of embellishment instead of historical truth, Jesus is dead, the apostles were liars, and our faith is vain (1 Corinthians 15:14–17). But evidences from the first and second centuries AD reveal that eyewitness testimony about Jesus emerged rapidly and circulated reliably. The New Testament texts relied on testimonies from apostolic eyewitnesses, and all of these texts were completed while the eyewitnesses were still alive.

Study Questions:

1. What are the essential truths of the gospel message as told by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1–11?

2. What assurances does Paul give the church in Corinth on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus? _____
3. In your own words, what is Paul’s main point that he wants to emphasize to the believers in Corinth in verse 11? _____

Prayer for the Road: Father in heaven, thank you for sending your Son, the Word in flesh, and giving us the Scriptures, your Word written down. Help its truthfulness impact every aspect of our lives. Amen.

Review and Prepare: *Optional things to work on during the week:*

Day One:

- In *How We Got the Bible* handbook, read “How We Got the New Testament” and “Chapter 4: Can We Trust the New Testament?”
 - Meditate on John 20:26–31 and 21:24–25. How do those verses in John express the importance of eyewitness testimony among first-century Christians? _____
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Day Two:

- Read 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 and 15:1–7. What do the words “received from” and “delivered” in this letter from the apostle Paul suggest? _____
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Day Three:

- Based on what you’ve learned in this study, what would you say to a close friend if she or he came to the conclusion that the New Testament Gospels are not fact but fiction? _____
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Evidence from the first century AD shows that testimonies about Jesus remained remarkably stable as they spread across the Roman Empire. Yes, two decades stood between Jesus’ death and the earliest surviving records about him—but that doesn’t mean that testimonies about Jesus were somehow mangled beyond recovery. There is clear evidence in Paul’s letters that the New Testament authors repeated and wrote the same testimonies they received. When they composed letters and Gospels, those authors drew from oral testimonies and teachings of eyewitnesses. Sometimes, they recited exact testimonies that their readers already knew (1 Corinthians 11:23–25; 15:3–7). Other times, they applied Jesus’ teachings without quoting them word for word (Romans 14:14; 1 Corinthians 7:10–11; 9:14)—but there’s no evidence that the authors of the New Testament fabricated the words and works of Jesus.

Day Four:

- Study 2 Peter 1:1–2, 16–21. Why do you think that ancient Christians chose to receive Peter’s letter as Scripture? _____
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Day Five:

- Study 2 Peter 3:14–18. Describe how Peter viewed the writings of Paul. _____
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Remaining Sessions and Dates:

- SESSION 4 – Tuesday, October 13 at 7 PM How the Books of the NT Were Chosen
- SESSION 5 – Tuesday, October 20 at 7 PM How the New Testament Was Copied
- SESSION 6 – Tuesday, October 27 at 7 PM How We Got the Bible in English