

Leader ◦

CAN

8 HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD & FAITH

I ASK

A STICKY FAITH CURRICULUM

THAT?

JIM CANDY, BRAD M. GRIFFIN, KARA POWELL

# *Session*

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*What is the Bible,  
anyway?*





## *Big Idea*

Students will wrestle with whether—and how much—the content of the New Testament was changed along the way before it became the Bible we have today.



( leader notes )

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This may be your students' first time hearing about this particular issue (and perhaps this is your first time tackling it with a group!). Give them background about why the Church believes the Bible is a reliable document, but also ask them to consider how reading the Bible might change their faith and life. Let them ask questions and raise doubts, and don't be afraid of not being an authority on the subject of biblical authorship. When your students ask tough

questions you can't answer, you can always do some research (ideally with them) and get back to the group at your next meeting.

Note that while we use the term "Bible" in the title for the sake of simplicity, we are predominantly focused on the reliability of the *New Testament* in this session as an introduction to how the Bible came to us from the early church.

## You'll Need



( leader notes )

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- ⊗ Your copy of this **Leader Guide** and a **Student Guide** for each participant.
  - ⊗ A pencil or pen for each participant.
  - ⊗ This session will require you to do some study up front. *Be sure* to look over this leader guide thoroughly and familiarize yourself with these concepts. If you have never studied the history of the formation of the books of the Bible before, you might want to do some additional reading to learn a bit more than this study provides.
  - ⊗ A flipchart or a big piece of paper and a marker.

Start by having a student read the following story out loud.

*Brett was the guy you never thought would walk away from God.*

He was “Mr. Youth Group” – never missed a meeting, camp, or mission trip. EVERYTHING the church did, Brett was there. He even helped in the children’s ministry and served as a camp leader.

He knew the Bible really well too. His parents had taught Brett a lot about the Bible, and he was one of those kids who seemed to get it. Most people thought Brett would become a pastor when he graduated from college.

But that all changed during Brett’s senior year of high school.

Brett decided to write his final senior project on how the New Testament was written. He started searching the Internet for sources, and found a scholar who is well-known for his biblical knowledge. This scholar had written many books. Brett was thrilled to learn from someone this well respected on something he cared about so much.



As he read through the scholar's blog, he found a post that seemed like just what he was looking for. But as he read, Brett was surprised and somewhat concerned by the things shared by the author.

*Has anyone played the game telephone? Telephone is the game when people pass a phrase around a circle by whispering into the next person's ear. Usually the message ends up very different by the time the phrase reaches the last person. Now, take a moment and imagine a giant game of telephone that lasts for centuries. That is the Bible.*

Brett was intrigued. He had never thought about how the Bible was actually put together. He always just assumed the books of the Bible were all stored together in a museum somewhere.

"Now," the blog post continued, "I find it curious that some people actually bet their whole lives on a game of telephone." The next section was titled "The Truth about the New Testament" and listed all the reasons this writer believed the New Testament can't be trusted.

Brett started wondering... *Am I betting my life on a telephone game?*

### **The Truth about the New Testament**

- ⊗ *We have no original copies of the New Testament books—only copies of copies.*
- ⊗ *The first copy we have of any part of the New Testament is from around the year 200 A.D.*
- ⊗ *People made mistakes when copying the Bible.*
- ⊗ *There are 300,000 changes in the Bible among all the different copies.*



(leader notes)

Ask your group for any big observations from the story and move quickly to the next section.

q

( questions )

In

( leader notes )

Listen intently during these first questions. How, if at all, have the members of your group been impacted at school and elsewhere by this topic? Whatever your personal opinion, resist the temptation to share your thoughts in the beginning of each session. Make sure your group feels the freedom to express their own thoughts before you share yours.

What do you know already about how the New Testament was written? What have you heard?

Does it matter if the Bible has been significantly changed since its original letters and books were written? Why or why not?

In

( leader notes )

You will likely find that most of your students have not dealt with this topic much before. Yet it is also highly likely that teenagers will be faced with this question as they progress in high school and beyond. Talking about this now helps your students avoid being surprised when it comes up along the way.



**In** ( leader notes )

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You may want to guide the conversation to focus on the overall narrative that plays out in scripture. The New Testament contains the history of God actually coming to earth as a person in Jesus Christ. The New Testament is not just a collection of sayings from a good teacher. If the Bible has been significantly changed, it might be difficult to have confidence in the main message of Christianity: *God entered the world in the person of Jesus to make all things right with God.*

Read the blog notes again from the opening story. What if those notes were all true? What does this make you think? How does it make you feel?

**In** ( leader notes )

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These points may sound surprising at first, but they do not necessarily discredit biblical integrity, especially when compared to other ancient literature. Looking at the list on the previous page, point by point:

\* We have no original copies of the New Testament letters and gospels. The original books written by Paul, the gospel writers and other authors have not been found. But we also don't have the originals of any other ancient work from that period.

\* The gospels and letters of the New Testament were written by different people in different places at different times. The stories of Jesus captured in the gospels were first passed down orally prior to being written down. But it's important to know that in the ancient world, this was how all stories were carefully preserved. In the modern world, "telephone" games don't work because we aren't an oral culture, but that's not true of the ancient world.



( leader notes )

\* The first copy of a fragment, or part, of the New Testament in existence is from around the year 200 A.D. Not all scholars agree on the timeline, but it is generally believed the original manuscripts were all completed by the year 90 A.D.

\* People made mistakes when copying the Bible. Almost no scholars would argue that scribes did not make some “variances” when they copied the New Testament. The question is: How important were they? Continue this session for more help with this question.

\* There are around 300,000 changes that have been noted among all the existing copies of scriptural texts. Scholars who cite this number add up all the variances initially made by scribes but then also include all subsequent copies, making the number seem more inflated.

In summary, archaeological discoveries have generally

affirmed the reliability of the transmission of scripture over time. In the 1900s, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, which confirmed that the Old Testament texts had not been significantly modified in the thousand years between when the Dead Sea Scrolls were written and when the next-oldest existing texts (the Masoretic Texts) were written (see [deadseascrolls.org](http://deadseascrolls.org) or [deadseascrolls.org.il](http://deadseascrolls.org.il) for more background.)

Even a quick web search comparing New Testament reliability to that of other ancient literature reveals that we have far more existing copies of the New Testament than other ancient literature. Additionally, the time span between the New Testament’s writing and our first surviving copies is far shorter than the time span between the writing and first existing copies of many other ancient works.



What do you notice about what's written on this paper?

**In** ( leader notes )

Make sure they get the following points:

- \* It's Greek, not English! (The New Testament was written in Greek; the Old Testament in Hebrew and Aramaic.)
- \* There are no punctuation marks.
- \* There are no chapter titles, verses, or explanatory footnotes. Those were added later.
- \* It was handwritten, not typed (let alone spell-checked on a computer!).

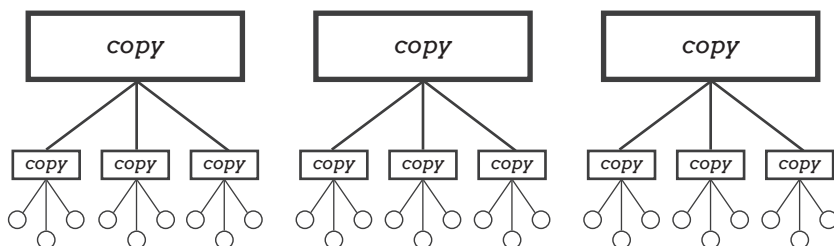
How would you guess something like this papyrus written 1,800 years ago became the Bible you have in your hand today?

**In** ( leader notes )

Let them respond...

Now it's time for you to do a little teaching. If you're not an expert, DON'T worry. This guide will walk you through enough background for the sake of this session. Draw the following diagram on a piece of paper or flipchart:

*Original Greek Manuscript of each New Testament Book*



**In** ( leader notes )

Help students understand that you are showing how the Bible was transmitted over time. There were no printing presses until Gutenberg's invention introduced mass printing in the 15th century! Until then, all copies of books were written by hand, usually by people trained as "scribes."

Now ask:

**1. What happens if one scribe is out too late the night before and makes a spelling error?** Circle one of the copies in the chart when you do this. Then ask, **What happens to the following copies after that one?**

Point out that once a scribe makes a mistake or "variance,"

all the subsequent copies will have the same variance. When biblical scholars count variances, they count the original variance and all the variances copied from that original.

**2. How do we know what were the original words of the New Testament if there are changes?**

Help students see that scholars can compare manuscripts to determine the original words of the Bible. In fact, scholars have spent thousands of hours doing this for English translations of the Greek and Hebrew portions of the Bible.

**In** ( leader notes )

Below are some questions we encountered while testing this study with high schoolers. We imagine you might also encounter them:

*\* I've heard there are other "Gnostic Gospels" (like the Gospel of Thomas). Why weren't they included in the Bible we use today?*

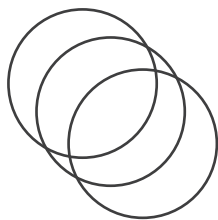
The early church used proximity to Jesus' life and eyewitnesses to help determine which books were included in the scriptures and which were not. The Gnostic (the root word means "knowledge" in Greek) Gospels were written later by a group that claimed "secret knowledge" about Jesus. The early church rejected the idea that Jesus' teachings were only for a privileged few who understood this secret knowledge. Many scholars believe the books of the New Testament were all originally written by about 90 AD, within approximately 60 years of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

*\* What is the "canon"?*

The "canon" means the books of the Bible believed to be genuine. The biblical canon is comprised of the books the early church believed to be the accurate and true New and Old Testaments. Many believe the New Testament canon was set by the middle of the 3rd century, according to evidence we have in letters from early church fathers. Note, however, that the Roman Catholic canon includes a few books that Protestant churches eventually excluded, so there's still some difference in opinion today about canonicity.

*\* How do we know the Bible wasn't changed before our earliest existing manuscripts?*

We don't. But according to the standards of other ancient literature, we have our first copies of New Testament texts very close to the time they were originally written. New Testament scholar John Montgomery states, "To be skeptical of... the New Testament books is to let all of classical antiquity slip into obscurity, for no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament."



When you're done with this section, you may want to just ask students to read these Sticky Notes on their own or point out to them the quotes from Bart Ehrman or F. F. Bruce. Note: Ehrman is one of the biggest proponents of the "telephone" theory and argues that the Bible is unreliable. It is useful to introduce your students to these arguments now, with you, rather than leaving them to discover these theories on their own later. You may want to peruse Ehrman's book, *Misquoting Jesus*, to familiarize yourself with his ideas. Additionally, there are numerous short videos of Ehrman on the Internet explaining his perspective.

n

( notes )

### *Why does this matter?*

Some people don't care if the Bible was changed through the years. They see it as a book with helpful thoughts from good teachers.

But the Bible is much more. The Bible contains the history of God and God's people over time, including the account of God actually coming to earth as a person: Jesus Christ.

If the Bible has been *significantly* changed, it might be difficult to have confidence in the main messages of scripture about who God is and who we are.

### *How did we get the Bible we have today?*

Although we believe the Bible is inspired by God, it didn't magically appear. God used normal people to write the Bible. Most scholars believe all the New Testament writings were completed within a handful of decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. The New Testament writers had access either to Jesus or to eyewitnesses of Jesus. People called "scribes" copied down the words of the Bible over many centuries.



If you were in a conversation with this blogging professor, what would you say or ask? Why?

## CONTEXT!

Is it unusual that the Bible was copied by hand over the years?

Answer: No.

*Every ancient book was copied. Why? No photocopy machines or printing presses! The Bible has been copied by hand and eventually copied in print **more than any other book in history**.*

Did every person who copied the Bible over the centuries do it with 100% accuracy? Few argue that every scribe did it perfectly and never made a mistake. The more important question is: What kind of changes (called “*variances*”) are there?

## What Kinds of Changes Did Scribes Make?

There *are* examples of scribes making changes as they copied the texts.

Bart Ehrman, a widely recognized New Testament scholar (who does not claim to be a Christian), notes that the Bible has many “copy errors.” However, Ehrman admits most differences don’t significantly change the meaning of those texts:

*“Most of these differences we have in our manuscripts are completely insignificant, unimportant and don’t matter for a thing.” - Bart Ehrman*

However, Ehrman believes some changes **do** affect how we read the Bible, like changes in the ways passages might be interpreted by shifting a word or two.



( leader notes )

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Ehrman holds that some scribes changed texts in an attempt to emphasize the divinity of Jesus. One example includes passages in Luke 2 that do not refer to Jesus' father. Ehrman contends that early scribes, defending the divinity of Jesus, changed the word "father" and instead used the name Joseph as a way to eliminate arguments that Jesus was not born to a virgin. College students will likely be exposed to arguments like this so it is helpful to familiarize yourself and prepare them.

So are the scriptures we now have faithful to the "original" Bible texts or not?

It's a complicated question, but most Christian scholars agree the answer is YES. One problem with the "telephone" argument is that *we still have many of the early copies* that affirm later copies. Even if a scribe **did** make a mistake, we often have an

earlier copy to compare. Another problem is that the biblical writings came out of primarily oral cultures, meaning people verbally shared stories in a whole different (and more consistent) way than we do today.

**QUOTABLE**

*"The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence of any writings of the classical authors, the authenticity of which no one dreams of questioning."* – F.F. Bruce, New Testament Scholar (Bruce and other scholars are comparing the New Testament to classical works by authors such as Plato, Homer and Aristotle).

Why do we have so many translations now?

Different people have taken early manuscripts and attempted to translate the Greek words (or Hebrew in the Old Testament) into Latin, then later English and other languages. Also, over time the church came to agreement about which books were part of the authoritative Bible and which were not considered part of scripture. The Bible we have today

is a product of those individuals, councils, Bible translators, and scholars through the years. But within the English language, for example, there are multiple translations of the Bible because different groups of scholars make different translation choices. That's because ancient languages often don't have exact English equivalents.

**In** (leader notes)

Lead your students out of this section by saying something like,  
**Let's look at one more scripture passage that shows in a different way why all of this matters.**

**S**

( scripture )

Most Christian traditions believe the Bible is God's inspired word to humanity. The Holy Spirit inspired human authors to capture God's Word and communicate it to God's people in specific places and times, as well as over time to us. Because we believe it's God's word, scripture has "authority" in our lives. The Holy Spirit uses scripture to shape us into people who live in relationship with—and try to live like—Jesus Christ.

The Bible is inspired by God for a *purpose*. Yes, it is designed to show us what happened and when. But it is also designed to *change us*. The apostle Paul wrote the following words prior to the creation of the entire New Testament we have today, but he still speaks to this reality when he writes:

*"There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us."*

– 2 Timothy 3:15-17 (The Message)

What do you think about the ways this passage claims the Bible is “useful”?

In what ways have specific Bible passages helped you to grow as a Christ-follower?

How has the Bible been hard for you to understand?

**In** ( leader notes )

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It will be fascinating to see how many of your students actually read the Bible, and if they can name experiences with the Bible that have helped them grow.

Some students, if they're really honest, will say that they have not had very good experiences with reading the Bible. Thank them for being honest about that, and let them know it's not uncommon to find the Bible confusing and complicated. At the same time, the Bible is written to reveal more about God and God's story to us, so the more we explore it, the more we will understand over time.



( talk )



( leader notes )

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In each session we want to make sure students understand why this particular issue might matter for them and their own faith development. We've created the following dialogue to help highlight different perspectives. Invite your students to create their own dialogue with these characters and with each other.

(Pretend you are with some friends who start talking about God. Read their viewpoints and follow the instructions below.)

WILL

I think Jesus is real and I don't understand why it matters if the Bible was changed or not. Almost everyone agrees that he was a real person and that he did amazing things. Why are we so worried over a few words in the Bible here and there? In fact, I'm not convinced that it really matters that Jesus was a real person. Can't we just live the way he taught us to live and not argue over a few changes in the Bible?

KIRSTEN

It's absolutely critical that the words in the Bible are the exact words of Jesus. If there is even one word that is not a direct quote, how can we have any trust that anything is accurate in the Bible? There are people out there who just don't like Christianity and are trying to make the Bible look bad.

MILES

All this study of the Bible is fine, but the big question is, "Would God allow us to have an unreliable record of his story?" God knew we would need a way to understand what it means to follow Jesus. I trust God enough to believe that we have the Bible we were supposed to get.

JESSICA

All these professors and scholars know way more than I do about the Bible. I have no idea how I'll ever tell what is right or wrong if the Bible was changed. So since I can't tell what is true or not, I am not sure if the Bible is true. How can anyone be totally sure? There are smart people who disagree on this stuff. Maybe they are all right and nobody is really wrong.

## Instructions

- ⊗ Take a pencil or pen and *underline* any thoughts the characters shared that you agree with. Why do you agree?
- ⊗ Take a pencil or pen and *circle* the thoughts you disagree with. Why do you disagree?
- ⊗ Share with the group why you circled and underlined what you did. Be open to learning something here from your leaders and other group members!

Do you have any other questions right now about this topic? What are they?

My opinion on this topic (at least for now) is...

**In** ( leader notes )

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Ask your group for brief thoughts about the next session's topic so you can be thinking about any particular needs your group may have in your approach.