

Session One

Who Handed You This Book?

Unless Someone Guides Me

Scripture, Tradition, and the Authority of the Church

Part One: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers, from the New Testament itself, that Scripture arrives in a person's hands through a living community with the authority to teach, and that no book of the Bible contains a list of the books of the Bible.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church did not make these books inspired. She recognized, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the books that already were. That act of recognition is not a threat to Scripture's authority; it is the reason you have a Scripture to hold.

This is the opening session of a study on defending the faith, so a word about strategy. We do not begin with Mary, or the papacy, or the Eucharist, because every one of those arguments is downstream of a prior question that almost nobody stops to ask: how does anyone know which books belong in the Bible in the first place? Start there and the rest of the study has ground to stand on. Start anywhere else and you are trading verses across a chasm.

How the Three Tiers Work

Every session in this study runs on three levels so that the newest person in the room and the one who has read Denzinger both leave fed.

THE FLOOR One verse and one sentence anyone can say out loud tonight. If a participant remembers nothing else, this is what they keep. It is printed on the Take-Home.

THE GROUND The inductive body of the session. The group finds the passages and builds the case themselves. This is where most of your ninety minutes goes.

THE DEPTH The full-strength steelman and the Objection Bench. Deploy as much as the room can carry. It is entirely acceptable to run a session using only the Floor and the Ground.

What You Need to Know

The most common way a Catholic loses a Scripture argument is by agreeing, without noticing, to a rule that was never in Scripture. The rule is this: whatever is not found in the Bible may be discarded, and the Bible interprets itself plainly to any sincere reader. Once a Catholic accepts that rule, the game is over before it starts, because that rule is precisely what is in dispute, and it cannot be established from the Bible without arguing in a circle.

So this session goes underneath the arguments to the table they are all sitting on. It asks a question that is not rhetorical and not a trick: where did the table of contents come from?

The historical shape of it

The New Testament was not delivered as a bound volume. Its books were written across roughly the second half of the first century, circulated separately, and copied unevenly. For generations, Christians in different regions held collections that did not perfectly match. Several books we now take for granted were genuinely disputed: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century, catalogues this dispute, though his categories are finer than a single list. In Ecclesiastical History III.25 he places James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John among the books spoken against. Revelation he handles differently again, listing it among the recognized books with an open hedge and noting that others rejected it entirely. Hebrews he treats separately and earlier in Book III, where the question is not whether it is Scripture but whether Paul wrote it and how the church at Rome received it. Meanwhile several books that are not in anyone's Bible today, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and the Letter of Barnabas, were read with affection in some churches.

The list you now hold did not fall from the sky and it did not assemble itself. St. Athanasius, in his Festal Letter of 367, gives a list of twenty-seven New Testament books identical to ours. Regional councils at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 and 419 issued canon lists that match the Catholic canon as we have it. A Roman synod under Pope St. Damasus I in 382 is traditionally associated with an early list as well, though scholars dispute the date and integrity of the surviving document, so we should not lean on it. The dogmatic definition came much later, at the Council of Trent in 1546, in response to the Reformers.

Be honest about that last point when it comes up, because it will. Trent is late. A Catholic who pretends the canon was formally defined in the fourth century is doing the same thing we are asking our interlocutor not to do. What the fourth century gives us is not a dogmatic definition but something in some ways more interesting: a settled, widely shared consensus arrived at through the discernment of the Church, in communion, over time.

St. Jerome, and why we tell his story straight

Someone in your group has heard that St. Jerome rejected the deuterocanonical books, and that a Doctor of the Church therefore agrees with the Protestant Old Testament. Resist two temptations here. Do not deny it, and do not tidy him up.

Jerome did have real doubts about the books outside the Hebrew canon and said so plainly. He also translated Tobit and Judith into Latin himself, and he rendered the Greek additions to Daniel, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, and the Prayer of Azariah with the Song of the Three Young Men, along with the Greek additions to Esther, in each case flagging that they stood outside the Hebrew; the books that came into the Vulgate through the Old Latin rather than his own hand were Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. He cited these books, and he deferred to the judgment and usage of the Church. He is neither a proto-Protestant nor a Tridentine Catholic. He is a brilliant, cranky scholar who held a minority scholarly opinion and did not make it a hill to die on. Telling the group that, exactly that, teaches them something more valuable than a debating point: our tradition is large enough to contain its own arguments, and we do not need to sand our saints down.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The pattern in this session is old. Israel never had a text without a teacher.

“And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” **Nehemiah 8:8**

The people have the text. They hear it read in their own assembly. And still the Levites must give the sense. The word for what is missing is not access. It is interpretation.

When a case is too hard, “you shall arise and go up to the place which the Lord your God will choose, and coming to the Levitical priests, and to the judge who is in office in those days, you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Then you shall do according to what they declare to you ... and you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you.”

Deuteronomy 17:8-10

God’s own provision for disputed cases in the Law is not a better-annotated scroll. It is a living authority whose decision binds. Verses 10 through 12 are the ones that make it binding: the decision must be obeyed, and refusing it is treated as a grave offense. Malachi says the same thing about the priest, that men should seek instruction from his mouth (Malachi 2:7).

The fulfillment is Philip running alongside a chariot in Acts 8, and the apostles gathered in council in Acts 15 saying that it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. The shape does not change across the covenants. It is deepened.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Augustine

Against the Letter of Mani Called “The Foundation,” ch. 5

Arguing with a group that claimed a secret authority, Augustine says that he would not believe the Gospel itself unless the authority of the Catholic Church moved him to it.

Note carefully what he is not saying. He is not saying the Church is above the Gospel, and he is not saying his faith rests on men rather than God. He is making a point about how anyone comes to hold this book as the Gospel at all. The Church is the reason the book is in his hands and is known to be what it claims.

Quotation securely attested with a standard locus.

Voice of the Church

St. Irenaeus of Lyons

Against Heresies, Book III (summary)

Irenaeus faces opponents who claim a private key to the Scriptures. His answer is to make the apostolic teaching public and checkable: go to the churches the apostles actually founded, trace the succession of those who taught there, and see whether what you are being sold matches what has been handed on in the open.

He also observes that whole peoples hold the faith without paper and ink, which does not diminish Scripture but does locate it: the faith was being lived and handed on before it was fully written, and the writing was received inside that handing on.

Presented as a summary of his genuine argument in Book III rather than as a quotation, since we are not printing a chapter number we cannot vouch for.

Voice of the Church

St. Vincent of Lérins

Commonitorium, ch. 2 (c. 434)

Vincent gives the famous test for authentic Christian teaching: what has been believed everywhere, always, and by everyone.

What is often missed is why he thought the test was needed. He grants that Scripture is deep and sufficient, and then observes the obvious problem: precisely because it is deep, people read it in contradictory ways, and nearly every party claims the text. So the reading must be guided by the sense

of the Church. He is not solving a shortage of Bible. He is solving a surplus of interpretations.

The threefold canon is a securely attested quotation; the surrounding argument is given as summary.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 120 gives the full canon and states that it was by apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings belong in the list of sacred books. Note the verb: discerned, not created.
- CCC 80 and 82 set out how Scripture and Tradition flow from the same divine source, and state that the Church does not draw her certainty about everything revealed from Scripture alone. CCC 81 is the paragraph that distinguishes them: Scripture is the speech of God put into writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit, while Tradition hands on the whole Word of God entrusted to the apostles.
- CCC 85 entrusts the authentic interpretation of the Word of God, written or handed on, to the living teaching office of the Church.
- CCC 107 is the paragraph to cite for inerrancy, teaching that the Scriptures teach without error the truth God willed put into them for our salvation (with Dei Verbum 11 behind it). Do not cite 112 to 114 for this; those paragraphs concern how to read Scripture in the Spirit.
- CCC 108 is worth reading aloud if you have time: Christianity is not a religion of the book but of the living Word.

Thread Watch

Leader only. Do not read this aloud and do not let it reach a Take-Home.

- THREAD A, the Unnoticed Premise. Planted tonight. The premise is that the text alone, read privately, is self-sufficient and self-interpreting. Tonight you only expose that it is a premise, not a conclusion. Do not resolve it. Session 2 presses it and Session 5 lands it.
- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. Take-Home 1 asks each participant to write the single verse they think most clearly teaches that Scripture alone is the final and only infallible rule of faith, the one authority no church, council or tradition may overrule, then seal it. Most will write 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Session 2 examines that verse without opening the envelopes, which is intentional. They open at Session 5.
- THREAD C, the Ethiopian's Question. Acts 8:31 recurs in every session as a diagnostic. Whenever the group hits an interpretive fork, ask it again: how can I, unless someone guides me?

Session Goals

1. Every participant can state where the table of contents of the Bible came from.
2. Every participant can name at least two books that were genuinely disputed in the early Church.
3. The group discovers, from Acts 8 and Nehemiah 8, that Scripture assumes an authoritative interpreter rather than excluding one.
4. Participants can distinguish two claims that are constantly confused: that the Church made the books inspired (false, and no Catholic holds it) and that the Church recognized which books were inspired (true, and unavoidable).
5. Nobody leaves armed for a fight. Everybody leaves able to ask one good question.

Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win questions: 15 minutes.
- Build, questions 1 through 4 (the Acts 8 discovery): 25 minutes.
- Build, questions 5 through 7 (the canon and the steelman): 30 minutes.

- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 15 minutes.

If you are running short: cut question 6 and the Dig Deeper on the Septuagint. Do not cut question 7 or the steelman; the session does not land without them. If you are running very short, cut the second Win question, which is the cheapest thing on the page.

THE OBJECTION BENCH

Leader only. Deploy what the room needs, skip the rest. Do not hand this page out. The matching Take-Home carries a shorter version in the participant's own words.

"Hippo and Carthage were local councils. They prove nothing."

Concede it cleanly, because it is true. They were regional synods, not ecumenical councils, and they did not dogmatically define the canon for the universal Church.

Then redirect to what they actually show: by the end of the fourth century the churches of the West, in communion with one another, had converged on the list we now hold, and the same list was carrying the day more broadly, with real variation persisting in places for some time yet. The Syriac churches, for instance, long used a New Testament without several of the shorter catholic epistles and without Revelation. That is the honest picture, and it is the one that helps us, because the Catholic claim is not that a regional synod created the canon. It is that the canon was discerned by the Church over time under the Spirit, gradually and in communion, which is exactly what the historical record looks like. Once settled, that list held for eleven centuries before anyone proposed subtracting from it.

"The Catholic Church added seven books at Trent."

Historically backwards, and this one is worth correcting gently but firmly. Those books stood in the Greek Septuagint that the early Church used, in the Latin Vulgate for over a millennium, and in the Hippo and Carthage lists. Trent defined the canon in 1546 in response to their removal, not by way of addition.

Module 6 (The Seven Books) handles this at depth. Tonight, one sentence and move on.

"Jesus and the apostles used the Hebrew canon, so we should too."

Hedge honestly here, because the scholarship is genuinely contested and overclaiming will cost you the room later. What can be said confidently: the New Testament quotes the Greek Old Testament heavily, and the Hebrew canon was not formally closed in a way that settles this question in Jesus's lifetime (the old theory of a decisive rabbinic council at Jamnia is now largely abandoned).

You can also note that Jude 14-15 draws on 1 Enoch, which no one holds as canonical, so a New Testament author citing a book does not by itself settle canonicity in either direction. That cuts both ways and you should say so.

"The books are self-authenticating. Believers recognize God's voice in them."

This is the strongest form of the objection and it is handled in the steelman chain at question 7. Do not answer it here in passing; it deserves the full treatment.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you opened the Scriptures to two discouraged disciples on a road and their hearts burned within them. Open them to us tonight. Give us the humility to be taught, the honesty to admit what we do not know, and the charity to think well of everyone we disagree with. We ask this in your name. Amen.

Win

1. Who first put a Bible in your hands, or first taught you anything about it? What do you remember about them?
2. Have you ever been in a conversation about faith where you knew you were right but had no idea what to say? You do not have to name names. What did that feel like?

Leader note. *Do not rush question 2 toward resolution. The frustration it surfaces is the engine of the whole study. Let it sit.*

Build

THE GROUND The next four questions are a live discovery. Do not preview where they lead.

Read aloud together: Acts 8:26-35.

3. Describe the Ethiopian official. What does he have going for him?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The group should assemble a genuinely impressive list: he is literate, wealthy enough to own a scroll (extraordinary in the first century), a court official of high rank, devout enough to have traveled to Jerusalem to worship, and sincere enough to be reading Isaiah in a moving chariot.

Press them to notice what this rules out. Whatever he lacks, it is not access to the text, sincerity, intelligence, or desire.

4. Philip asks whether he understands what he is reading. Read his answer in verse 31 exactly as it stands. What is he saying he needs?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

“How can I, unless some one guides me?”

He needs a person. Not a better scroll, not more sincerity, not more time alone with the text. A guide.

Note for yourself, and only mention if the group does not reach it: Luke does not present this as a failure on the eunuch’s part. Nobody scolds him. The need for a guide is treated as the ordinary shape of things, and God’s response is to send one, by explicit instruction of the Spirit (v. 29).

5. Philip is not an apostle. He is one of the seven set aside in Acts 6. Does that weaken or strengthen the point?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Strengthens it. The point is not that only the Twelve may interpret. It is that interpretation runs through the sent, commissioned life of the Church rather than through private ingenuity. Philip was one of seven chosen by the community at the apostles' direction, then set before the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them (Acts 6:3-6); he is operating inside a structure, not freelancing.

If someone raises that Philip simply explained the obvious, hand them Isaiah 53 and ask them to identify the servant from the text alone, with no New Testament in hand. Jewish readers of goodwill have gone in more than one direction on that chapter. A major and long-standing line reads the servant corporately as Israel; other Jewish sources, including the Targum on Isaiah, read the passage of the Messiah. That the tradition itself divided over it is the point. It is not obvious. It is obvious to us because we were told.

DIG DEEPER: What did the eunuch not have?

He is reading Isaiah 53, one of the clearest messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, in a text he owns, and he cannot get to the bottom of it.

Compare Nehemiah 8:8, where the assembled people hear the Law read aloud and the Levites must still give the sense. And compare Luke 24:27, where the risen Christ himself does not hand the disciples a reading plan; he interprets. And notice that Scripture says this about itself. Peter writes that in Paul's letters there are some things hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15-16). The difficulty is not a modern complaint invented to make room for the Church. It is in the New Testament, stated by an apostle, along with the observation that private handling of a hard text can go badly wrong.

Live discovery. Split the group. Give one half fifteen minutes and one instruction: find the verse in the Bible that lists which books belong in the Bible. Give the other half the same time to find any verse in which Scripture claims to be the final and only infallible rule of faith, the one authority no church, council or tradition may overrule. Let them actually search. Do not shorten this.

6. What did you find?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Neither list exists. There is no inspired table of contents anywhere in Scripture.

The second group will usually arrive at 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which is the right instinct and the reason we spend all of Session 2 on it. Tonight, receive it warmly and say only this: we will give that verse a full session, at full strength, next week. Do not answer it now. The tension is doing work.

Expect discomfort here, and do not smooth it over. The discovery is supposed to be slightly disorienting. Say plainly: this is not a gotcha, and it does not mean Scripture is unreliable. It means Scripture arrived with something.

The Steelman

THE DEPTH Present the following at full strength. Read it aloud. Do not soften it, and do not let your tone signal that a rebuttal is coming.

The strongest form of the objection.

The Church did not give us the canon. God did. A book was inspired the instant it was written, and it did not need a committee's permission to be what God had already made it. The councils did not confer authority on these books; they recognized an authority the books already carried and that believers had already been submitting to for centuries. Sheep know the shepherd's voice. So the

Church is a witness to the canon, not an authority over it, and a witness who testifies to a king does not thereby outrank the king.

And notice what follows. If the Church's recognition is what makes Scripture trustworthy, then Scripture rests on the Church, and the Catholic has quietly made the word of man the foundation of the Word of God.

7. That argument contains something true. What is it? And what question does it leave standing?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

What is true, and Catholics should say so first and without hedging: the Church does not make books inspired. Inspiration is God's act, complete the moment the sacred author wrote. CCC 120 says the Church discerned which writings belong. Discerned. If anyone in your group thinks the Church manufactured the canon's authority, correct them tonight; that is not the Catholic position and defending it will lose arguments we should win.

What the argument leaves standing is not a question about God. It is a question about us. Granting that the books are self-authenticating, how does this believer, in this century, know which books those are? The answer cannot be that sincere Spirit-led readers simply recognize them, because for three hundred years sincere Spirit-led readers disputed Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation, and read Hermas and Barnabas alongside them. The recognition was real, but it was gradual, contested, and corporate. It happened in the Church, over time, through her discernment.

So the objection succeeds in showing that the Church is not the author of Scripture's authority, which no Catholic claims. It does not touch the actual claim: that God gave his Word to a people, and that the people he gave it to are how it reached you, intact and identified.

One more move, only if the room is ready. The objection assumes that resting on the Church means resting on the word of man. But 1 Timothy 3:15 calls the church of the living God the pillar and bulwark of the truth, and Luke 10:16 has Christ tell the sent ones that whoever hears them hears him. Those are the Bible's own words about the Church. To trust her is not to leave Scripture. It is to take Scripture at its word about what Christ built.

DIG DEEPER: The books they argued about

Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century, lists the books then spoken against: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, with Hebrews and Revelation contested in various quarters (Ecclesiastical History III.25).

This is not a scandal and should not be presented as one. It is what honest, careful reception looks like. The early Christians did not accept a book because it sounded good. They asked whether it came from the apostles and whether the churches had received it. They took their time. We are the beneficiaries of their caution.

Send

8. If someone asked you tonight where your Bible came from, what would you now say? Try saying it in two sentences.

9. Is there anything about tonight that unsettled you? Say it out loud if you can. This group can hold it.

Leader note. *If nobody is unsettled, you may have oversold the answers. A little vertigo tonight is a good sign, and Session 2 catches it.*

Live It This Week

- Read Acts 8:26-40 slowly, once, without a commentary. Notice how much of it is God arranging a meeting.
- Find out who first handed you a Bible or first taught you the faith. If they are alive, thank them this week. If they are not, offer a Mass or a rosary for them.
- Look up how the readings at Sunday Mass are chosen. Ask your pastor or search for the Lectionary cycle. Notice that you are handed Scripture on a schedule you did not design.
- Pray daily, by name, for the one person you most want to have this conversation with. Ask for their good, not for your victory.

Closing Prayer

Father, you did not drop a book on the world and walk away. You gathered a people, you sent them out, and you gave us your Word inside their hands. Thank you for everyone who carried it to us. Make us worth trusting with it. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Memory Verse

“How can I, unless some one guides me?” **Acts 8:31**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order of appearance.

- Nehemiah 8:8, the Levites give the sense
- Deuteronomy 17:8-12, hard cases go to a living authority whose decision binds
- Malachi 2:7, men seek instruction from the priest's mouth
- Acts 8:26-35, Philip and the Ethiopian official (core text)
- Acts 8:31, memory verse
- Isaiah 53, the passage the eunuch could not unlock
- Acts 6:1-6, Philip among the seven
- Luke 24:27, Christ interprets rather than assigns reading
- 2 Peter 3:15-16, some things hard to understand, twisted by the unstable
- 1 Timothy 3:15, the church as pillar and bulwark of the truth
- Luke 10:16, he who hears you hears me
- Acts 15, the council (planted for Session 3)
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17, raised tonight, answered in Session 2
- Jude 14-15, the 1 Enoch citation (Objection Bench only)

Catechism: CCC 80, 81, 82, 85, 107, 108, 120.

Patristic: St. Augustine, Against the Letter of Mani, ch. 5. St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book III. St. Vincent of Lérins, Commonitorium, ch. 2. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III.25.