

Session Two

The Word Before the 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 that the Gospel was preached, believed, and obeyed before a word of the New Testament was written, that the New Testament itself commands holding to what was handed on by mouth, and that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 does not claim what it is usually asked to claim.

Catholic Touchstone. Scripture and Tradition are not rivals and not two separate piles of information. They flow from one source, the one Word of God entrusted to the Church. Tradition is not a set of extra facts bolted onto the Bible; it is the living handing on of the whole Gospel, inside which the Bible was written and is read.

Last week the group found that no book of the Bible contains a list of the books of the Bible. Someone almost certainly reached for 2 Timothy 3:16-17, and you deliberately did not answer it. Tonight you do, at full strength, and you will find that the verse is far more interesting than either side usually lets it be.

What You Need to Know

The Church existed for roughly twenty years before the earliest New Testament document was written, and for something like three centuries before the collection was settled. During that time people heard the Gospel, believed it, were baptized, celebrated the Eucharist, were martyred for it, and handed it on. Whatever they were handing on, it was not a book they did not yet have.

That is not a Catholic argument imposed on the text. It is what the New Testament says about itself, repeatedly and without embarrassment. St. Paul uses the vocabulary of handing on constantly: he received and he delivered (1 Corinthians 11:23 and 15:3), he tells the Thessalonians to hold what was taught by mouth or by letter, and he tells Timothy to entrust what he heard to reliable people who will teach others. St. Luke opens his Gospel by saying his account rests on what was delivered by eyewitnesses. St. Paul tells the Romans that faith comes by hearing.

The word itself

The Greek is *paradosis*, from a verb meaning to hand over or hand down. It is the same word behind our word tradition, and the New Testament uses it both approvingly and disapprovingly, which is the whole key to this session.

When Jesus attacks tradition in Mark 7, the phrase is the tradition of men, and the specific abuse is a rule that lets a man dodge his duty to his parents. When St. Paul commands tradition in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, it is what the apostles handed on. Same word, opposite verdict, and the difference is the source.

The Catechism makes exactly this distinction at CCC 83, separating the apostolic Tradition from the many ecclesial, theological, disciplinary, and devotional traditions that developed later and can be

retained, modified, or abandoned. Have that paragraph ready. It disarms the objection that Catholics call anything they like Tradition, and it does so honestly rather than defensively.

A distinction you should know and should not flatten

Catholic theologians have held two views about how the content of revelation is distributed. Some hold what is called material sufficiency: everything revealed is contained in Scripture at least implicitly, with Tradition serving as the authoritative way of reading it. Others have held that some revealed content comes to us through Tradition alone. The Second Vatican Council in *Dei Verbum* deliberately declined to settle the question, and both positions remain open to a faithful Catholic.

Why this matters tonight: if someone in your group says everything Catholics believe can be found in the Bible somewhere, you should not correct them, because that is a permitted Catholic position. And if someone says it cannot, you should not correct them either. What the Church does teach is that Scripture alone is not the sole rule of faith. CCC 82, quoting *Dei Verbum* 9, says the Church does not draw her certainty about everything revealed from Scripture alone, and that Scripture and Tradition are to be accepted and honored with equal devotion and reverence. Two further points follow from settled teaching and are worth having at your fingertips: the canon was discerned by apostolic Tradition rather than by Scripture itself (CCC 120), and authentic interpretation of the Word of God, written or handed on, is entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church (CCC 85). Theologians summarize all of this by saying Scripture is materially sufficient but not formally sufficient. That phrase is a theological shorthand, not a defined formula, so use it to organize your own thinking rather than as a quotation from the Church. Keep the argument on CCC 82, 85, and 120 and you are on solid ground.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Israel was commanded to hand the faith on by mouth long before most of it was written, and the command is domestic rather than academic.

These words “shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” **Deuteronomy 6:6-7**

At Passover the command is sharper still. The child asks what the rite means, and the parent answers with a story (Exodus 12:26-27, 13:8). The liturgy itself is the vehicle of transmission. Israel remembered by doing something and explaining it, year after year, to people who had not been there.

“Things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord.” **Psalms 78:3-4**

The fulfillment is 1 Corinthians 11:23, where St. Paul introduces the words of institution with the technical language of handing on: he received from the Lord, and he delivered to them. The Eucharist reaches Corinth by tradition before it reaches anyone by text.

Voices of the Church

Voice of the Church

St. Basil the Great

On the Holy Spirit, ch. 27 (summary)

Basil argues that the Church holds some things from written teaching and others from the apostolic tradition handed on privately, and that both carry the same force for godliness.

His examples are deliberately ordinary rather than exotic: the sign of the cross, turning east to pray, and

the words used at the blessing of the eucharistic elements. His point is that no one can produce chapter and verse for these, and no one seriously proposes discarding them. The practice of the Church is older than the objection to it.

Given as a summary of his argument in ch. 27 rather than as a quotation.

Voice of the Church

St. John Chrysostom

Homilies on 2 Thessalonians (summary)

Preaching on 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Chrysostom takes the verse at face value. If St. Paul distinguishes what was taught by word from what was taught by letter, then the apostles plainly did not deliver everything in writing, and what was delivered by mouth deserves the same credence.

It is worth noticing that this is not a Catholic reading invented later to win an argument. It is a fourth-century bishop reading the sentence in front of him and drawing the obvious conclusion.

Summary of his exposition in the homily series on 2 Thessalonians; no chapter number printed, since we are not vouching for a critical-edition locus.

Voice of the Church

Papias of Hierapolis

Preserved in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III.39

Papias, writing in the first half of the second century, explains that when he could find someone who had known the apostles, he questioned them, because he did not think what came out of books would help him as much as what came from a living and abiding voice.

Represent him honestly if the group asks. Eusebius, who preserves the passage, also thought Papias was a man of limited understanding and disliked his millenarian views. Papias is a witness to an instinct in the early Church, not an authority on doctrine, and saying so protects your credibility more than tidying him up would.

The substance is securely preserved in Eusebius at the standard locus; given as summary rather than quotation.

Catechism Connection

- CCC 75-79 set out the apostolic Tradition: Christ commanded the Gospel be preached, the apostles handed it on by their preaching and by writing, and the succession continues that transmission.
- CCC 80 and 81 state that Scripture and Tradition are bound closely together and flow from the same divine wellspring, moving toward the same goal.
- CCC 82 states that the Church does not draw her certainty about everything revealed from Scripture alone, and that both are to be accepted with equal devotion and reverence (quoting Dei Verbum 9).
- CCC 83 is your most useful paragraph tonight: it distinguishes the apostolic Tradition from later ecclesial, theological, disciplinary, liturgical, and devotional traditions, which may be retained, modified, or abandoned. Use it before someone accuses you of calling the rosary apostolic.

Thread Watch

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

- THREAD A, the Unnoticed Premise. Tonight you press it hard but you still do not resolve it. The group will see that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 does not say what it is asked to say. What they will not yet see is the positive claim about who does have authority to read. That is Sessions 3 and 4, and the resolution lands in 5.

- THREAD B, the Sealed Guess. Envelopes stay sealed. Tonight you will examine the very verse most of them wrote down, and you must not acknowledge that. If someone says out loud that this was their sealed answer, smile and say we will find out in a few weeks. Do not confirm.
- THREAD C, the Ethiopian's Question. Ask it again at the steelman: whatever the verse means, how would a person alone with the text settle a dispute about what it means?

Session Goals

- 1. Every participant can say that the Gospel was preached before it was written, and can name at least two New Testament passages that say so.
- 2. Every participant can distinguish the tradition of men that Jesus condemns from the apostolic tradition that Paul commands, and can explain why the same word gets opposite verdicts.
- 3. The group discovers, from 2 Timothy itself, that Paul draws on material outside the Old Testament eight verses before he says all Scripture is inspired.
- 4. Participants can state what 2 Timothy 3:16-17 does affirm, positively and generously, without conceding what it does not say.
- 5. Nobody leaves thinking Catholics have a secret list of oral traditions, because they do not, and we will say so.

Timed Plan

- Opening prayer and Win questions: 12 minutes.
- Build, questions 1 through 4 (the handing-on vocabulary): 20 minutes.
- Build, questions 5 through 6 (the Jannes and Jambres discovery): 15 minutes.
- The steelman and question 7: 28 minutes. Protect this.
- Send, Live It, closing prayer: 15 minutes.

If you are running short: cut question 4 and the Dig Deeper on Acts 20:35. Never cut the steelman or question 7. If the room is struggling, drop the material-sufficiency material entirely; it is leader background and no participant needs it tonight.

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.

"Jesus condemned tradition. Read Mark 7."

Read it with them, all of it. Jesus condemns "the tradition of men" that voids the commandment of God, and his example is the Corban rule that let a man withhold support from his parents. He is not condemning the act of handing on; he is condemning a human rule that overturned a divine one.

Then set Mark 7:8 beside 2 Thessalonians 2:15. Same Greek word, opposite verdict. The New Testament itself requires the distinction, and CCC 83 makes it. If a Catholic tradition ever nullified a commandment of God, Jesus's words would apply to it, and we should say that plainly rather than flinch.

"Those oral traditions were just the Gospel, which later got written down."

This is the strongest version of the objection and it deserves respect. It is possible in principle, and no one can prove from 2 Thessalonians 2:15 alone what specific content the oral mode carried.

Two responses. First, Paul contrasts word of mouth and letter as two present modes of one handing-on, and nowhere suggests the oral mode has an expiration date. Second, ask what the objection costs: if the oral tradition was entirely absorbed into the written text, then somebody had to be able to certify that absorption was complete, and that is an act of authority outside the text.

"So where is the list of oral traditions? Produce it."

Concede immediately and without squirming. There is no list, the Church has never published one, and any Catholic who implies there is a sealed scroll somewhere is inventing.

Then explain why the demand misunderstands the claim. Tradition is not a set of extra propositions kept alongside the Bible. It is the living transmission of the whole faith, which includes how the Scriptures are read, how the sacraments are celebrated, and how the Church is ordered. Ask the person what they would accept as a list of the English language. The question assumes the wrong kind of thing.

"The rosary is not in the Bible. Neither is the Assumption."

CCC 83. Devotional and theological traditions are not the apostolic Tradition and nobody claims they are. The rosary developed and could in principle have developed differently.

The Assumption is a different case and you should not lump them together. Do not attempt it tonight; it belongs to the Mary module in Book Two. If pressed, say honestly that it is a defined dogma held to be contained in the deposit of faith, that its scriptural grounding is typological rather than a proof text, and that it deserves a proper hearing rather than five rushed minutes.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, before anyone wrote a word about you, people who had seen you told others what they had seen, and the world was changed by it. Thank you for every voice that carried the faith to us. Give us ears tonight, and patience with each other, and the honesty to follow the text where it goes. Amen.

Win

1. Think of something you know how to do that you did not learn from a book. Who taught you, and how?
2. Last week we found there is no table of contents in the Bible. Has that been sitting with you at all this week?

Build

THE GROUND Questions 3 through 6 are the discovery. Keep the pace brisk; the weight of the session is the steelman.

Read aloud, in this order: Luke 1:1-4, then Romans 10:17, then 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

3. Luke says his account rests on what was delivered by eyewitnesses. Delivered how? What existed before Luke wrote?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A body of testimony, held and passed on by people who had been there. Luke is not the origin of the material; he is a careful compiler of something already circulating and already authoritative.

Note the direction of dependence. The written Gospel depends on the prior handing on, not the other way around.

4. In 2 Thessalonians 2:15 Paul names two ways the Thessalonians received what they are to hold. What are they, and does he rank them?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

By word of mouth or by letter. He does not rank them. He puts them side by side as two modes of one handing-on and tells them to hold both.

If the group is quick, have someone read Mark 7:8 immediately after. Same Greek word for tradition, opposite verdict. Ask what makes the difference. The answer is the source: the tradition of men against what the apostles handed on.

Live discovery. Read 2 Timothy 3:8 aloud, where Paul names Jannes and Jambres as the men who opposed Moses. Then send the group to Exodus chapters 7 and 8 with one instruction: find those two names in the Old Testament. Give them a full ten minutes and let them search properly.

5. Did you find them?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

No. The magicians of Pharaoh are never named anywhere in the Old Testament. Jannes and Jambres

come to Paul from Jewish tradition outside the canonical text.

Let this land before you say anything else. Paul, writing under inspiration, uses material handed down outside Scripture, and treats it as reliable enough to build an argument on.

Be precise and do not overreach: this does not make that tradition inspired, and it does not prove any particular Catholic doctrine. What it shows is that the author of the verse most often used to exclude tradition was himself comfortable drawing on it, in the same chapter.

6. Now read 2 Timothy 2:2, in the same letter. What is Paul arranging?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

A chain of transmission. What Timothy heard from Paul before many witnesses, he is to entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others in turn. That is four links: Paul, Timothy, faithful teachers, and those they teach.

Paul's plan for preserving the faith after his death is not primarily to write more letters. It is to hand it to people who will hand it on. Do not push this into a full argument for apostolic succession tonight; that is Session 4. Just let them see it.

DIG DEEPER: A saying of Jesus that is in no Gospel

In Acts 20:35 Paul quotes the Lord Jesus saying that it is more blessed to give than to receive. No Gospel records that sentence.

So a saying of Christ reached Paul, and reaches us, only because it was handed on. John says as much at the end of his Gospel: the world could not contain the books if everything were written (John 21:25).

The Steelman

THE DEPTH Read the following aloud in full. Do not soften it and do not telegraph a rebuttal. If it does not make the room slightly uncomfortable, you have not read it properly.

The strongest form of the objection.

Read the verse and take it seriously.

"All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3:16-17

The Greek word behind inspired by God is theopneustos, literally God-breathed. Some translations render it that way. Say so if it helps; the claim is the same and it is a very high one.

Notice the destination of that sentence. Not adequate. Not helpful. Complete, and equipped for every good work. If a second source of authority were necessary to make a Christian complete, then Scripture by itself would leave him incomplete, and Paul would have written something weaker. The word every leaves no remainder. Whatever good work you can name, Scripture equips for it.

And do not think the previous verse blunts this. Paul is not saying that only the writings Timothy knew as a boy are God-breathed. He is stating a quality that belongs to every God-breathed writing, so that as the apostolic writings are given and recognized, the same sentence covers them too. The Scriptures Timothy learned from childhood were the beginning of that collection, not its boundary.

And this is not an isolated proof text. It is the settled instinct of Scripture about itself: the word is a

lamp to the feet, it does not return empty, it judges the thoughts of the heart. Adding a second stream of authority that cannot be checked against the first is precisely how the commandment of God gets replaced by the tradition of men, which is the abuse our Lord condemned by name.

7. Now read verse 15, the sentence immediately before. Which writings is Paul talking about, and when did Timothy learn them?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

From childhood, Timothy has known the sacred writings that instruct for salvation. For a boy raised by a Jewish mother and grandmother, that means the Old Testament. Much of the New Testament did not exist yet, and 2 Timothy itself is being written as Paul says this.

This is the hinge, and it must be handled fairly rather than triumphantly. If the passage establishes that Scripture alone is a Christian's sufficient authority, then the Scripture in view establishes it for the Old Testament alone, which no one holds. So the verse cannot be doing the work it is asked to do, not because Catholics need it not to, but because of the sentence directly above it.

Say the counter out loud before anyone else does, because it is a good one. A thoughtful reader will answer that verse 16 is not naming a list; it is naming a quality of whatever is God-breathed, and that quality attaches to the New Testament writings as they are given. Grant that reading. It is fair, and Catholics have no reason to resist it. Then notice what it costs: the argument now depends on the completed canon rather than on this sentence, and this sentence does not tell you which books are in that canon. That is the fourth point below, and it is where the weight of tonight actually falls.

Second point, from the vocabulary. Paul chose a word meaning profitable, useful, beneficial. That is a warm and generous claim and Catholics should make it loudly: Scripture is profitable for all four of those things. But profitable is not the same as sufficient, and Paul had words available for sufficiency.

Third, on completeness. Compare James 1:4, where steadfastness is to have its full effect so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. Nobody concludes from that verse that steadfastness alone is enough for the Christian life. Language of completeness in Scripture describes what a thing does when it does its work, not the absence of everything else.

Fourth, and this is the one to end on. Whatever the verse means, it does not tell you which books it is talking about, and it does not settle a dispute between two people who both accept it and read it differently. That is not a weakness in Scripture. It is the reason Christ left more than a library.

Leader note. *Do not let the room turn gloating. The correct posture at the end of this is respect: this verse is a genuine and beautiful statement about Scripture, and the person quoting it loves the Bible. We are not taking it from them. We are reading the sentence above it.*

Send

- 8.** Say something true and generous about Scripture that you actually believe. Not a defense, just a statement.
- 9.** Who handed the faith on to you by mouth rather than by text? What did they say?

Live It This Week

- Read 2 Timothy 3 in one sitting, the whole chapter, and watch verse 8 go past on the way to verse 16.
- Tell one person one thing about the faith out loud this week, without sending them a link.
- At Mass, notice how much of the liturgy you know by heart and never learned from a page.

- Keep praying by name for the person you named last week.

Closing Prayer

Father, you spoke before anyone wrote, and your Word became flesh before it became a book. Thank you for the Scriptures and for the living Church that carried them to us. Keep us from using either one as a weapon against the other. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Memory Verse

“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” **2 Thessalonians 2:15**

Part Three: Leader Reference Card

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

- Deuteronomy 6:6-7, teach them diligently to your children
- Exodus 12:26-27 and 13:8, the Passover explanation to the child
- Psalm 78:3-4, what our fathers have told us
- 1 Corinthians 11:23 and 15:3, received and delivered
- Luke 1:1-4, delivered by eyewitnesses (core text)
- Romans 10:17, faith comes by hearing
- 2 Thessalonians 2:15, by word of mouth or by letter (memory verse)
- Mark 7:8, the tradition of men
- Colossians 2:8, according to human tradition
- 2 Timothy 3:8, Jannes and Jambres (live discovery)
- Exodus 7-8, where the group searches and finds no names
- 2 Timothy 2:2, entrust to faithful people who will teach others
- Acts 20:35, a saying of Jesus found in no Gospel
- John 21:25, the world could not contain the books
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the steelman
- 2 Timothy 3:15, the sentence above it
- James 1:4, perfect and complete, lacking in nothing

Catechism: CCC 75-79, 80, 81, 82, 83.

Patristic: St. Basil, On the Holy Spirit, ch. 27. St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Thessalonians. Papias, in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History III.39.