



Making Sense of the Bible

Week 2: Making Sense of the New Testament

Lori Lampert - 05/08/2022

I am one of the four children of Doris and Gerald Firth. I am the third child, with two older brothers and a younger sister. Somehow or another time has passed, and we are all in our 60s. And all except one of us qualifies for Medicare. So strange.

Over the past year, we have gathered together to celebrate a niece's wedding, to grieve the death of our father, to honor my mother's 90th birthday, and most recently they were kind enough to come together just because I was in Georgia to visit mom.

Each of us was born in a different city in New York as our family moved with dad's career. We left New York state when I was in second grade; moved to Minneapolis; then to Tuscaloosa, Alabama; and ultimately mom and dad and my youngest sister and later my second brother, ended up in Athens, Georgia. We went to different universities, made different decisions about where to live as adults, and then started our own families.

All this to say, when we sit around the table and recall our childhood, it is through very different lenses. We were all in the same place, on the same vacations, spending time with the same parents, but we did not have the exact same experiences.

Our personalities are very different, yet we share many of the same values. We all deeply love our mom and dad and each other. We all are Christ

followers living out our faith in different ways in different places. We have all had struggles and challenges in life and experienced the death of people we love and now the joy of grandparenting. If we each sat down and wrote about the impact of our childhood, it would not be with the exact same words. We would remember it differently, choosing to emphasize what was most important to each of us individually. And each account would still be true.

In no way am I equating my life to that of the Apostles, but I want us to think today about how we make sense of the part of the Bible called the New Testament.

What we call the Old Testament tells of the defining story of the people of Israel, the New Testament is the defining story of Christianity. It tells us of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It goes on in letters written to the first generation of Christ followers from the Apostles. Each of these letters was written to address the issues and challenges of their day as they set about transforming the world through sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And The New Testament concludes with a prophetic book that warns of dangers. Dangers from powerful oppressors outside of the faith as well as the terrible risks to the body of Christ when we lose our way and forget the importance of our call. This last, beautiful book is also a vision of the world as we pray in our liturgy for Holy Communion: "Christ comes again and we feast at his heavenly banquet."

Biblical scholars believe that the New Testament was ultimately written over a period of 50 years—with the letters of Paul written over just 15 years—but the collection of these books into one accepted body of work did not happen for centuries. It was Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt in his Easter letter who first listed the 27 books of the New Testament as we find them today in the Bible before you. That was Easter in the year 367 AD.

Thirty years later, in 397, a council in Carthage, Africa declared that these books were canon, the rule for Christians. The New Testament as we know it didn't exist until 367 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and 330 years after the deaths of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

The New Testament, our defining story, did not come to us simply or without great thought. It comes to us through the voices and hands of generations of people who wrote, edited, and compiled the words and actions of Jesus. Generations who faithfully preserved the many ways living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ will always be the way this world will be transformed.

In his book, *Making Sense of the Bible*, Adam Hamilton explains the way in which these books became canon:

- **Usefulness** - These gospels and letters were considered useful to a large number of churches over a period of several hundred years in spreading and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- **Consistency** - The message of the documents was consistent with the faith established by the Apostles and being preached in churches throughout the many regions where the Gospel had spread—from Rome, though Asia Minor, around the Mediterranean, into northern Africa, and beyond.
- **Association** - These words could be historically associated with the first generation of Christian leaders.
- **Acceptance** - The majority of churches had agreed to accept these documents as being set apart by God, inspired by God, and infused with the Holy Spirit to meet the needs of their generation and generations of Christ followers to come.

The New Testament is beautiful, powerful, incredibly holy and sacred. It is a continuation of the story of God revealed in the Old Testament. God, who is always calling people back into a relationship and to a way of life that transforms the world. These books continue the story of God reaching through time and space to bring fallen people back, to restore and set right the world.

The New Testament is the story of God's defining act through incarnation entering into humanity in Jesus Christ. It is also the product of multiple authors and memories. Different books written to different audiences to share the glory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Letters written to respond to other letters that we do not have and can only surmise the content of. The

prophetic voice of the book of Revelation does as the books of the ancient prophets did. It warns of the dangers of becoming lukewarm in our faith, or forgetting our first love, Jesus Christ. It builds to give us a hope and a future in life now and life everlasting based and confirmed in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus the Christ.

All of the New Testament is important. All of it must be read, explored. We need room to question, and to wonder with others, *what* we are reading, what we are learning from it. We need room to let the Holy Spirit work within us. Room to take these words of life and let them transform us.

The Bible has the ability to persuade and to teach, to change lives and to bring healing. These words give substance to our faith and a firm foundation on which to stand.

And... They can also be misused, misunderstood, taken out of context, wielded like a hammer on the heads of people we disagree with, and this misuse can cause tremendous, terrible harm. Over the next few weeks we are going to open ourselves up to think about those passages of scripture that we let disunite us, passages that we can too easily use to carve out hard dividing lines instead of drawing a circle where *all* are included. A circle as big as the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

I invite you to take time this week to read the gospels. Yes, all four of them. Maybe you have done this many times. Maybe you've never done it. Maybe it's been a long time since you've sat down and physically held a bible in your hands and read the story of Jesus. We have Bibles here you are welcome to take with you. Regardless, reading the gospels is always a great way to start.

The first three Gospels of Jesus Christ, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels. Synoptic means "see with." They see with one another. Many of the stories in them are the same, but not all. It is believed that Mark was written first, by a person who had captured the words of Peter before his death in Rome. But even that book pulled from pre-gospel writings from those who first began to make note of the words and actions of Jesus Christ. These three gospels tell us how Jesus lived, and how we are to live. They

describe what Jesus did and where it all happened. They take us beside Jesus from his birth to his death and then his resurrection. They are written so we can understand the humanity of Jesus even as his divinity is made evident and never diminished.

Read these three, and then turn to the gospel of John. The spiritual gospel. Most likely written by John the Apostle at the end of his life. His concern as you read his gospel is clear. We must understand the divinity of Jesus. The Word made flesh. The One sent by God who was with God in the beginning and returned to rule at the right hand of God. John wants us to know why. Why Jesus came. Why he lived and died and was resurrected. Why, when Jesus ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit came to us. You have probably heard—many times—John’s most repeated words. I often read it here to remind us of the why. John 3:16 and 17.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Please read the gospels. This is how you come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. This is how the kingdom of God grows on earth as it is in heaven. And aren't we ready to be part of the solution and not part of the problem? Aren't we past the time of living in the kingdom of humankind where war is waged because one group wants what another group has. Where people are killed because they are inconveniently in the way.. Where money is made on the backs of those who are themselves dying of addictions. Where behind closed doors abuse is hidden, and people are cowering. Where we resort to hate for those we do not understand, and judgment for those with whom we do not agree.

Let me quote Adam Hamilton as he describes what happens as God becomes the rightful ruler over each of us.

Each time someone repents and becomes a follower of Christ, the rebellion experiences defeat and the king's rightful rule expands. The impact of each person choosing to follow Christ, living a life in service to God the king, is incalculable. Every relationship, every interaction, every decision across the course of that person's life is different because of this one decision to follow Christ, who comes representing the kingship of God. The world is restored by this preaching of the kingdom and the faith-filled response of those who repent. The message of the kingdom is summarized by two commandments: love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Read the Gospels. Join one of our groups exploring Hamilton's book *Making Sense of the Bible*. Resolve to grow the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven before the sun sets tonight. Reading the words, hearing them preached, listening to a podcast, picking up a commentary, using Google to know more—all of these are important. But then respond. That's the most important part. It must be more than head knowledge, it must become a part of who you are: A follower of Jesus Christ who loves God and loves neighbor in word and deed.

You know, those times that I am able to sit with my brothers and sisters and talk about what we remember of growing up in the Firth household are too few and very precious.

When I hear their recollections and their perspectives, if I set aside for a bit my surety of what I remember, I learn more about my own life. I am able to learn what was going on around me that I didn't know. I learned how the words of my mom and dad landed on their ears and shaped their lives. I begin to understand the adults we are today more clearly. And I am grateful.

I invite you, as you seek to make sense of the New Testament, to open your minds and hearts to the richness that is yours through the voices and writings of those who have preserved for us our defining story.

I ask you to stand with me as we declare the historic words of the Apostle Creed. Words that became accepted and repeated as a statement of belief for Christ followers over 1500 years ago. Would you please stand:

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;*
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Let's pray:

Almighty God, we give thanks for the many who listened well to Jesus as he walked the earth and have preserved for us the Gospel story. We give thanks for those who questioned and wondered and sought to know how to follow Jesus and gave us the letters we have as the Apostles responded. We give thanks for a warning and a vision you revealed to John that helps us understand your grace as you always stand at the door and knock, waiting for us to open and let you rule our lives. With gratitude and awe we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.