

Lutheran Basics User's Guide

10 programs on a 2-DVD set

In-depth study guides on Disk 2: *The Bible*

- 2.1 *Introducing the Old Testament*
- * 2.2 *Introducing the New Testament*
- 2.3 *Introducing Jesus of Nazareth*
- 2.4 *The Life of the Apostle Paul*
- 2.5 *Women in the Early Church*

2.2: Introducing the New Testament

Objectives and suggested uses for the video

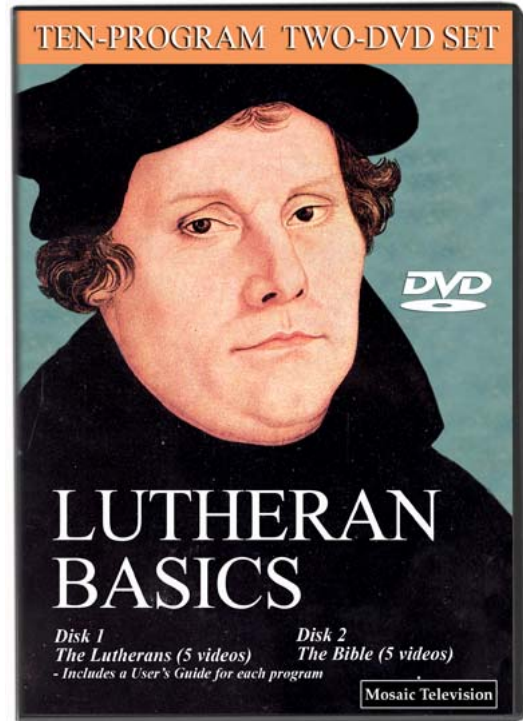
The Bible remains the world's best-selling book. According to a survey by George Gallup, 93 percent of American homes contain a Bible or a portion of the Bible – usually the New Testament. However, that same research indicates that only 36 percent of Bible owners read it on a daily basis. Clearly, these rich scriptural resources are being underutilized.

Sometimes people don't open their Bibles because the written language there is not our everyday language. Allusions to customs and traditions, unfamiliar references and understanding geographical and political influences on the material present barriers. Many are overwhelmed by the book's complexity, and uncertain how to begin to unravel what seems an impenetrable mystery. So, even in times when people seek meaning for life and hope for their futures, Bibles remain closed, figuratively and literally.

Introducing The New Testament seeks to cut through some of the mystery in order to re-introduce the life-giving message of hope. It examines the various literary genres in which the writers proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of Israel's hopes and God's new covenant promises offered to all humanity. By bringing us visually into the places where the New Testament was written and introducing us to the people to whom it was addressed, it opens a book of life-giving power. Its bookmarks are the three genres or literary categories: the four Gospels, the letters/epistles, the apocalyptic literature of the Revelation to St. John, and a brief look at how the New Testament canon was formed. Commentators on this journey are professors of religion at a number of ELCA colleges and universities.

This study guide seeks to take that material and open it up for discussion to overcome concerns that keep us from reading the Bible and to "get us into" some of the texts that reveal God's *good news* – not as history but as a living word for today.

Before watching the video, ask participants how many of them have a Bible or New Testament at home and how often it is read. Ask them to identify reasons they or others might not read their Bibles regularly. **At the end of the sessions planned for this material**, ask them if this has helped them open their New Testament as a companion in their faith journey.



A. Topical discussion – Questions/suggestions for adults

1. Make sure everyone has a copy of the New Testament in hand.
 - *List reasons the New Testament might have been written.*
 - *Discuss why the Church has preserved the New Testament through the centuries.*
 - *Compare the group's responses with John 20:30–31.*
2. Open to the New Testament's table of contents. *Which books are familiar at least by name? Turn to those that seem to be unfamiliar and briefly provide a content overview.*
3. Ask participants to discuss both how they were first introduced to the Bible and where they currently encounter passages from the Bible. Note that in Lutheran worship, there are generally two readings from the New Testament and one from the Old Testament.

The Gospels

4. "Gospel" means "good news."
 - *What is the "good news" the evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are writing about?*
5. In the video Ken Sundet Jones says that it is during the Babylonian exile that "you start to get this surging of messianic hopes. There is this great hope that this king will arise."
 - *What were the people looking for and what is God's New Testament answer?*
 - *What is John the Baptist expecting? How does Jesus seem to define the Messiah in Matthew 11 (verses 2 and forward)?*
6. Read Mark 1:1–8. Mark's Gospel begins with the appearance of John the Baptist.
 - *Does this book then "end" with the subsequent life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus?*
 - *In which ways can we consider that the "gospel" is still being proclaimed and enacted?*
 - *How is the "good news" happening in your community of faith?*
7. Read Luke 1:1–4. This evangelist seems to indicate that he has access to various "orderly accounts" of Jesus' life.
 - *How does Luke's use of these other accounts fit with the belief that the New Testament writers were "inspired"? (See 2 Timothy 3:16.)*
 - *What do we as Lutherans understand "inspired" to mean?*
8. In the video Ken Sundet Jones says, "I think one of the great miracles of the New Testament, – and one of its great gifts – is that it is not just one picture of Jesus. It is a whole bunch of pictures of Jesus. And they are words that work for different people in different ways in different times, so that God is always working to establish a word that actually works for you."
 - *What pictures of Jesus work for you? What in his story particularly engages your faith life?*
9. In the video Joy Heebink says, "My favorite (Gospel) is Luke. I see Luke as the most sensitive to the marginalized people. [Luke is] the most concerned about the lost — about women, about children."
 - *Given the brief descriptions of each Gospel in the video, which Gospel interests you most?*
 - *Are there times when a particular Gospel offers greater comfort, hope, or inspiration than the others do?*

The Letters (Epistles)

10. Obtain a map of the Mediterranean world in the first century. Plot out the various cities and regions to which the letters of the New Testament were sent.
 - *What does the fact that so many of them are addressed to congregations in major cities (Rome, Corinth, Philippi) say about the spread of the faith in the Roman Empire? Do you think Christianity is primarily an urban testimony? Why or why not?*
11. Make a list of the issues Paul addresses in 1 and 2 Corinthians.
 - *Are any of his thoughts on these issues applicable to congregational life today? If Paul were to write to your congregation, are there challenges he would need to address? What do you think he would he say?*

Book of Revelation

12. Revelation was written for those being persecuted for their faith, and is not intended as a blueprint for the “end times.”
 - *What message does it have for those of us not being oppressed, who, nevertheless, live in watchful hope for Jesus’ return? What “gospel” does it contain for us?*
13. Compare the “gospel-centered” message of Revelation with the theme of the popular *Left Behind* series of books and films.
 - *From your reading of Revelation, what critique would you offer to the Left Behind view of the world and history?*

The New Testament canon

14. In the video Joy Heebink says, “There were many Gospels written. The church over its history started finding ones that they thought were the best testimony – the most credible testimony to who Jesus is.”
 - *What were some criteria on which they based their selections over time?*
15. In the video Mark Mattes notes that the book called the Gospel of Thomas, which has achieved some popularity has “what we would call deeply gnostic themes.” Most scholars think that it was ultimately rejected as part of the canon for that reason.
 - *What is Gnosticism? Why was it rejected by the Church?*

An activity

Provide the group with a list of subjects addressed by the New Testament and applicable for our lives of faith. (e.g., service, care for the poor/disadvantaged, worship, thanksgiving, fruits of the spirit, etc.) Ask each group member to choose one topic and provide up to six or seven brief New Testament passages that illustrate these as God’s gifts or as a faithful response to God’s promises. Ask them to note briefly why they selected each passage and how it speaks to them or to your faith community. Use one passage on your Web site each week, noting who selected it and their reason(s) why. Do this for as many weeks as you have Scripture references, enlisting other members to contribute similar responses to Scripture – perhaps with new categories. This can both enliven and personalize your Web site and will help move people into the New Testament both as researchers and as Web users. And it will say something about your ministry to those who click on the site. Don’t have a Web site? Use the contributions in your church newsletter or weekly bulletin instead.

B. Youth study discussion

Remembering the video:

1. The video breaks the New Testaments into parts according to its literary style. *What are the parts?*
2. In the video Ken Sundet Jones says that “It is impossible to have a saving faith apart from Scripture.” *Why?*
3. The gospel writers are often referred to as “the four evangelists.” *What does evangelist/evangelism mean?*
4. **Short takes**
 - *How many books are there in the New Testament?*
 - *Which was the first Gospel written? The last? How do we know?*
 - *What does the word “gospel” mean?*
 - *Which author wrote the most books in the New Testament?*
 - *Which book records the history of the early church? Which book is its earlier companion?*
 - *What sort of literature is the Book of Revelation?*
 - *How is the New Testament, in the video words of Joy Heebink, “a sequel to the Old Testament?”*
 - *Whose account of Jesus is most likely the resource for Mark’s gospel?*
 - *What was the language spoken by Jesus and his disciples? What is the written language that forms the New Testament?*
 - *How was the New Testament Canon formed? By whom?*

Going a little deeper into the video

5. Read chapter one of each of the Gospels.
 - *Which one holds your attention? (For many, it will be the Gospel of Mark.) Jesus seems to be in a hurry to do God’s work. How might that urgency inspire a greater ministry of service for your youth group?*
6. In the video Ken Sundet Jones says that it is during the Babylonian exile that “you start to get this surging of messianic hopes. There is this great hope that this king will arise.”
 - *What were the people looking for? What is God’s New Testament answer? What is John the Baptist expecting? How does Jesus seem to define the Messiah in Matthew 11:2 ff ?*
7. In the video Ken Sundet Jones says, “I think it is one of the great miracles of the New Testament and one of the great gifts is that it is not just one picture of Jesus. It is a whole bunch of pictures of Jesus. And they are words that work for different people in different ways in different times, so that God is always working to establish a word that actually works for you.”
 - *What pictures of Jesus work for you? What in his story particularly engages your faith life?*
8. Compare the account of Jesus’ baptism in all four Gospels (Mark 1:9–11; Matthew 3:13–17; Luke 3:1–20; and John 1:6, 15, 19–28).
 - *What “good news” from each account can be applied to your life?*Look at the rite of Holy Baptism in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (pp.121 and forward).

- *What elements of that service are drawn from Jesus' baptism?*
9. Make a list of similarities and differences in the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' resurrection (Mark 16:1–8; Matthew 28:1–10; Luke 24:1–11; and John 20:1–18).
- *Which story speaks most hopefully or meaningfully to you? Why?*

The Letters (Epistles)

10. Find a map of Paul's three "missionary journeys." Many of the countries and regions he visited are now heavily populated by followers of Islam.
- *How should Christians witness to Muslims today? What about Jewish people?*
11. One high priority of teens is the approval of peers. Read chapter 3 of James.
- *What helpful advice is given for dealing with gossip and hurtful comments about others?*

Book of Revelation

12. Revelation 5:1–14 describes a scroll with God's plan to defeat evil and rescue the people. It seems at first as though the scroll will remain closed, evil will overcome, and God's purposes will remain hidden. Many people look at this world and believe evil is too strong to overcome.
- *What word of hope does this chapter give to the readers of Revelation about the defeat of evil and death?*
13. In the video Ken Sundet Jones says that apocalyptic writing is intended to be consumed by people who understand it is symbolic. When reading it, we can get in trouble because we don't know to what all the picture language refers.
- *What do you think are some of the characteristics of apocalyptic literature? Which two books of the Bible represent this style? During what kind of times was apocalyptic writing popular and why do you suppose that was?*

The New Testament Canon

14. In the video Joy Heebink says of the early Church, "They expected the return of Christ at any moment. It was just around the corner, the next day. Once these people started aging and dying, I think the Church realized, "We have to preserve these memories. We can't lose this. When these people go, there needs to be a recorded history."
- *If you were in that early second-century Church, what would be your criteria for shaping a "new testament," a record for future generations? What would you be looking for?*
15. Some Christians will argue that since Scripture is sacred and divinely inspired by God, therefore it is without error. Others will affirm that these writings are sacred and they come from God but are also human and influenced by human culture and limitations.
- *Where does our church stand on this and why? What do we mean when we say that Scripture is "divinely inspired"?*
16. In the video Fred Strickert says that "When you look at Jesus' words, one of the final words to the disciples, it says that the spirit will lead you in all truth. To the people who wrote the New Testament, the Spirit was leading them."
- *How can that Spirit lead us to make the connection with the New Testament in our daily lives?*

An activity

Using either the library or an Internet search:

1. Find a good time line for when each of the books in the New Testament was probably written.
2. Have each class member look up the traditional symbols used to represent the four evangelists: Matthew – angel; Mark – lion; Luke – ox; John – eagle; and see if they can find out why. Bring copies or have someone draw these.
3. Similarly, find representations for the other New Testament books/writers so that each is represented by a drawing/picture. These can come from Web sites.
4. Combine all of these elements in a “New Testament Display” on a bulletin board together with any appropriate (brief) text of explanation.

Helpful resources

- Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 1997. Magisterial; nothing else comes close in either comprehensiveness or clarity of writing. Extensive bibliographies list more specific works on individual books of the New Testament. ISBN 0-3852-4767-2. \$50
- Luke Timothy Johnson. *The Writings of the New Testament* with CD-ROM. Popular introductory textbook. Order from Augsburg Fortress Publishers by phone (800/328-4648) or online <www.augsburgfortress.org/store/> ISBN 0-8006-3439-X. \$39
- Gerd Theissen. *Fortress Introduction to the New Testament*. A compact, accessible guide for general readers. Order from Augsburg Fortress Publishers by phone (800/328-4648) or online <www.augsburgfortress.org/store/> ISBN 0-8006-3622-8. \$19
- Barbara R. Rossing. *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*. 2004. Order from Augsburg Fortress Publishers by phone (800/328-4648) or online <www.augsburgfortress.org/store/> ISBN 0-8133-9156-3. \$24