Ad Fontes, Week One: To the Sources

An introduction to New Testament textual criticism

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

Taught by **Larry Herzog Jr.** · Fall 2026

Week One

This is the introduction. Next week we open *Ad Fontes, Volume One: New Testament Textual Criticism for the Laity* and begin working through it together. Today is orientation: what this study is, why a congregation should care, and what you will need to bring.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 15	What textual criticism is
15 to 25	Why it matters for this congregation
25 to 35	Lower criticism and higher criticism
35 to 50	Inspiration and preservation
50 to 65	Open your Bible: the “missing verses”
65 to 70	Assignment and closing

What this class is not

It is not a class in Greek. You will meet a few Greek words the way you meet a few medical words at the doctor’s office, and you will not be quizzed on any of them.

It is not an attack on anybody’s Bible. If you have read the King James for sixty years, bring it. We will be looking at the notes at the bottom of the page in several translations, and the King James tradition is one of the witnesses we need.

It is not a class in doubt. Nobody here is going to be told that we cannot know what the apostles wrote. That claim gets made loudly in popular books, and we are going to look straight at it and see why it does not hold.

What this class is

A study of how the New Testament came to us, in the ordinary way God ordinarily works: through copyists, parchment, ink, churches, and centuries. We are asking one question, and it is a modest one.

What did the apostle write?

1. What textual criticism is

Textual criticism is the work of comparing the surviving copies of a document in order to determine what its author actually wrote.

That is the whole definition. It is not a judgment on Scripture. It is a judgment on copies of Scripture, which is a very different thing. The word *criticism* here does not mean finding fault. It means careful discernment, in the same sense that an art critic or a proofreader is a critic. Nobody in this discipline is sitting over the Word of God. We are sitting over stacks of handwritten copies, trying to read them carefully.

Why the work exists at all

God did not deliver the New Testament by dropping bound books out of the sky. He gave it by the ordinary means he always uses: real men writing real letters to real congregations, on papyrus, with ink, in Greek. Paul dictated to a secretary named Tertius, who added his own greeting to the letter (Romans 16:22). Those original sheets were then copied by hand, because there was no other way to get a letter from Corinth to Rome to Ephesus.

Here are the plain facts about what survived:

- We do not have a single original sheet. Not one. Papyrus rots. The autographs were read to pieces in the congregations that loved them.
- We have somewhere around 5,800 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, in whole or in part, ranging from scraps the size of a credit card to complete Bibles.
- We have roughly 10,000 Latin manuscripts and thousands more in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Gothic, and other ancient translations.
- We have a vast number of quotations of and allusions to the New Testament in the sermons and commentaries of the early church fathers, a third great body of evidence alongside the manuscripts and the translations.
- The earliest fragments come within a century or so of the writing. For any other document from the ancient world, that is an embarrassment of riches. We have more and earlier copies of the New Testament than of any other book from antiquity, and it is not close.

Where the differences come from

Copy anything by hand and you will make mistakes. Copy a long book by candlelight and you will make more. Most differences among the manuscripts are exactly what you would expect from tired men with pens:

- The eye skips from one line to the next because both end in the same word.
- A word is heard wrong when a room of copyists works from dictation.
- A familiar phrase from Matthew slips into Mark, because the copyist knew it by heart.

- A note that a reader wrote in the margin gets copied into the text by the next man, who thought it belonged there.
- A copyist smooths an awkward sentence, or spells a name the way his own region spells it.

Deliberate doctrinal mischief is the rarest category, not the common one, and where it is suspected, the manuscripts themselves are what expose it. That is the point worth holding onto: the differences are visible to us precisely because God preserved so much evidence. A church with one manuscript would have no variants and no way to check anything. We have variants because we have witnesses.

2. Why it matters

We confess that Scripture alone is the source and norm of doctrine. The Formula of Concord puts it plainly: the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and guiding principle by which all teachers and teachings are to be judged (FC Ep, Rule and Norm 1). Luther said the same thing at Smalcald from the other direction: the Word of God alone establishes articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel (SA II.II.15).

If that is our confession, then the question *what does the text say* is not an academic hobby. It is the first question. A congregation that will not ask it has not protected the Bible. It has only agreed not to look.

Two errors this class walks between

The first error says the question is dangerous. On this view, to admit that manuscripts differ is to hand the Bible over to unbelievers, so we should pick one edition, usually the King James, and treat every other reading as an attack. The impulse behind it is reverent. The result is not. It quietly makes a seventeenth-century English committee, working from printed Greek editions built on a small number of late manuscripts, into the standard by which the apostles are judged. That is tradition sitting on top of Scripture, which is the very thing our fathers objected to at Augsburg. And it is fragile: the first member of your family who reads a footnote and discovers he was never told will wonder what else he was never told.

The second error says the question is fatal. This is the popular skeptic's move, and it sells a lot of books. It runs: there are hundreds of thousands of variants among the manuscripts, more variants than there are words in the New Testament, therefore nobody can know what the New Testament said. The arithmetic is true and the conclusion is a trick. The variant count is high because the manuscript count is high. The great majority of variants are trivial: word order that does not change meaning, the presence or absence of a Greek article, slips of the pen, and nonsense readings that one glance corrects. Of the remainder, a small fraction affects the sense of a sentence, and of those, not one puts a single article of the Christian faith in play.

Here is the test, and you should hold us to it all fall.

> **Not one doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading.** The Trinity, the two natures of Christ, his bodily resurrection, justification by faith apart from works, baptism, absolution, the

> Lord's Supper, and the resurrection of the body are all taught in passages nobody disputes, in multiple books, by multiple authors.

That is why a Lutheran can look at the evidence with an open face. We are not protecting a fragile thing. We are handling a well-attested one.

The pastoral reason

Someone in your family has a study Bible with brackets around John 7:53 to 8:11. Someone has seen a video claiming the church removed verses. Someone reads the King James at home and a pew Bible on Sunday and has quietly noticed they do not match. These questions are already in the congregation. They are only not being asked out loud. The purpose of this class is to make sure that when the question comes, the answer comes from the church that baptized you, and not from a stranger on the internet who has an angle.

3. "Lower" and "higher" criticism

These two labels get confused constantly, and the confusion is the reason many good Lutherans think textual criticism is poison. They are not two grades of the same activity. They are two different activities that happen to share a word.

	Lower criticism (textual criticism)	Higher criticism (historical criticism)
Asks	What did the author write?	Who really wrote this, when, from what sources, and what actually happened?
Works with	Manuscripts, ink, handwriting, ancient translations, quotations in the fathers	Theories of authorship, sources, editors, and the development of religion
Evidence	Physical objects you can photograph	Reconstructions in the scholar's mind
Can be checked by	Anyone who looks at the same manuscript	Mostly by agreeing with the scholar
Goal in practice	Hand the church the apostle's words	Very often, explain the apostle's words away

The words *lower* and *higher* are unfortunate. They come from nineteenth-century German usage, where *lower* meant foundational, the work done first, and *higher* meant the work built on top of it. Nothing about quality was intended. If the labels bother you, call them what they are: textual criticism and historical criticism. In this class, when I say the real thing, I mean textual criticism.

Why we take the one and refuse the other

Textual criticism is a servant. It is the same discipline a historian uses on any handwritten document, and it has no opinion about whether the document is inspired. It simply tries to recover the wording. A confessional Lutheran can use it with a clear conscience, and should, because our whole confession rests on what the text says.

Historical criticism as it developed in the academy is a different animal. It did not merely ask hard historical questions. It came with a set of assumptions built in: that miracles do not happen, that predictive prophecy is impossible, that the supernatural claims in a text are later additions by a believing community, and therefore that the task of the scholar is to reach the "real" Jesus underneath the apostles' witness. Two Isaiahs because chapter 45 names Cyrus. A late Daniel because it is too accurate. A Gospel of John invented late because its Christology is too high. Notice that the conclusions were in the assumptions all along. The method was built so that the text could not be allowed to be what it claims to be.

The difference in one line:

> **Textual criticism submits to the manuscripts. Historical criticism, in its dominant form, submits the text to the critic.**

So the answer to a neighbor who says "isn't criticism of the Bible liberal?" is this: examining the copies is not criticizing the Word. Refusing to examine the copies is how you end up defending a copy instead of the Word.

4. Inspiration and preservation

This is the heart of the hour. Most of the fear around this subject comes from running two doctrines together that Scripture keeps distinct.

Inspiration

We confess with the whole church that the Scriptures are God-breathed. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for instruction, for conviction, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16 BSB). Peter says that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21 BSB). The old Lutheran dogmaticians called this verbal inspiration: not that the writers were put into a trance, but that the Spirit so governed them that the words they chose were God's words. Luke's careful research (Luke 1:1 to 4) and Paul's request for his cloak at Troas (2 Timothy 4:13) are both inspired, and both read exactly like a man writing.

Notice what inspiration attaches to. Inspiration is a claim about what the apostles and prophets wrote. It is not a claim about the man who copied Romans in Caesarea in the year 400, or the printer in Basel in 1516, or the translation committee in London in 1611. None of those men were carried along by the Holy Spirit. They were working, and working men make mistakes.

This is why we can say without flinching that a given manuscript has an error in it. We have not said God erred. We have said a copyist erred, which he plainly did, since the manuscript sitting next to it has the word right.

Preservation

God promises that his Word endures. “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8 BSB). “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35 BSB).

Now read those promises carefully, because people import things into them that are not there.

What God promised: that his Word will not perish from the earth, that the gospel will be preached, that the church will have what she needs to make disciples, baptize, teach, absolve, and administer the Supper until Christ returns.

What God did not promise: that one manuscript would be flawless, that one printed edition would be flawless, that one translation into one language at one moment in history would be flawless, or that the church would never have to do the ordinary work of comparing copies.

The preservation we actually got is better suited to how God works than the one people wish for. He did not hide a perfect copy in a vault. He scattered the text across thousands of manuscripts, dozens of languages, and hundreds of congregations on three continents, so that no emperor, no heretic, and no council could alter it everywhere at once. Preservation by abundance. That is a very Lutheran arrangement: God hiding his surety inside ordinary, public, checkable means, the way he hides forgiveness in water and hides Christ’s body in bread.

Why this does not unsettle our confession

Luther translated from the Greek text Erasmus had assembled, and he made textual judgments while he did it. He knew Jerome and the fathers had discussed disputed readings. He knew the ancient church had questions about certain books. None of that made him uncertain about the gospel, because his certainty never rested on the flawlessness of a copyist.

And our certainty does not rest there either. Ask where your assurance actually lives. It lives in a promise attached to a means: “This is my body which is given for you,” “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” “I forgive you all your sins.” Those words are not in textual doubt. They never have been. The man who trusts them is not standing on a scholarly reconstruction. He is standing on Christ, who gave them and keeps them.

> **Inspiration is about the autographs. Preservation is about the church. Textual criticism is how the church does the work preservation left her.**

5. Why this is lay work

There is an assumption in the air that this subject belongs to specialists, and that ordinary Christians should be handed conclusions instead of evidence. We reject that, and we reject it on Lutheran

grounds. Our fathers put the Bible into the language of the plowboy and the catechism into the hands of the head of the household. A church that translates Scripture for the laity and then tells the laity that the text itself is above their pay grade has not finished the job.

You do not need Greek to do the first four-fifths of this work. Here is what you actually need.

A translation with honest footnotes. This is the whole entry point. Modern translations tell you where the manuscripts disagree, right there at the bottom of the page. Most people have never read those notes. Starting today, you will.

A second translation from a different family. Put a King James or New King James next to a BSB, ESV, NET, or NIV and you have, in effect, two different manuscript traditions open in front of you. Where they differ, something is going on, and the notes will usually tell you what.

The willingness to look. That is the real barrier, and it is not an intellectual one.

What the specialists have that you do not, and why it matters less than you think

They read Greek, they read the handwriting, they have the full apparatus of variants, and they have spent years on the history of the manuscript families. That is real expertise and I am not going to pretend otherwise. But notice what they do with it: they publish it. The evidence is not hidden. The footnote in your pew Bible is the distilled result of that work, offered to you for free, and reading it intelligently is a skill a farmer can learn in a fall of Sunday mornings.

What you can do without a seminary degree:

- Read and understand the textual footnotes in your Bible
- Tell the difference between “some manuscripts add” and “the earliest manuscripts lack”
- Look up a disputed passage in three translations and see the pattern
- Explain to your grandson why his Bible has a bracket that yours does not
- Recognize when somebody online is selling fear instead of facts
- Know, and be able to say, that no article of faith is at stake in any of it

That is a genuinely useful set of skills, and there is nothing in it that requires a scholar’s permission.

6. Open your Bible: the “missing verses”

How we will do this. Pair up. Each pair takes three passages from the list. Look them up in whatever Bible you brought, then in one of the other translations on the table. Write down what you find. Three questions for each:

1. Is the verse there, missing, bracketed, or footnoted?
2. What exactly does the footnote say?
3. If it were gone from your Bible tomorrow, what would you no longer know?

That third question is the one that matters, and you will find the answer is almost always “nothing.”

Passages to look up

Present in the King James and New King James. Absent from the running text, or bracketed, in the NET, ESV, NIV, CSB, and NASB, with a footnote in each case. The BSB also leaves every one of them out of the running text and gives the missing words in a footnote, usually noting that the Byzantine text (BYZ) and the Textus Receptus (TR) include them.

Passage	What the KJV has	What is most likely going on
Matthew 6:13b	“For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.”	An ancient liturgical doxology the church prayed, written into the margin and then into the text
Matthew 17:21	“this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting”	A copyist’s eye borrowing from Mark 9:29
Matthew 18:11	“the Son of man is come to save that which was lost”	Borrowed from Luke 19:10
Matthew 23:14	“ye devour widows’ houses”	Borrowed from Mark 12:40 or Luke 20:47
Mark 7:16	“If any man have ears to hear, let him hear”	A familiar refrain added where it seemed to fit
Mark 9:44, 46	“where their worm dieth not”	Verse 48 has it; a copyist supplied the repetition
Mark 11:26	“But if ye do not forgive”	Borrowed from Matthew 6:15
Mark 15:28	“he was numbered with the transgressors”	Borrowed from Luke 22:37
Luke 17:36	“Two men shall be in the field”	Borrowed from Matthew 24:40
John 5:3b to 4	the angel troubling the water	A marginal explanation of local belief, later absorbed into the text
Acts 8:37	the eunuch’s confession, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”	An early baptismal confession written in the margin
Acts 15:34	“it pleased Silas to abide there still”	A copyist smoothing an apparent problem in verse 40
Acts 28:29	“the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves”	Narrative filler
Romans 16:24	“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”	A duplicate of verse 20

Passage	What the KJV has	What is most likely going on
1 John 5:7 to 8	“the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one”	The Comma Johanneum. Absent from every Greek manuscript before the fourteenth century. Luther refused it; printers added it to his Bible after his death

Two long passages handled differently

Passage	How most modern translations treat it	The BSB
Mark 16:9 to 20	Printed, but set off with brackets or a heading noting that some of the earliest manuscripts end at verse 8	Printed in the running text, with a note at 16:8 that some early manuscripts end the Gospel after verse 8 and others have only a short ending
John 7:53 to 8:11	Printed, usually in brackets or with a note that the earliest manuscripts lack it and that some place it elsewhere	Printed in the running text, with a note at 7:52: “Some early manuscripts do not include John 7:53 through John 8:11.”

These two are worth noticing because they show the translators’ actual habit. Nobody deleted them. They were kept, with the evidence disclosed. That is not suppression. That is the opposite of suppression.

Variants that change the wording rather than remove a verse

These are more interesting than the omissions, and some of them come back later in the book.

Passage	KJV tradition	Modern text	At stake
1 Timothy 3:16	“God was manifest in the flesh”	“who was revealed in the flesh” (BSB: “He appeared in the flesh,” with a note giving the BYZ and TR reading)	Two Greek words that differ by two pen strokes. Christ’s deity is taught either way, and in a dozen other places
Luke 2:14	“peace, good will toward men”	“peace among people with whom he is pleased” (BSB: “peace to men on whom His favor rests”)	One Greek letter at the end of one word

Passage	KJV tradition	Modern text	At stake
John 1:18	“the only begotten Son”	“the only one, himself God” (BSB: “the one and only Son, who is Himself God,” with a note)	Both readings are old. The harder reading, found in the oldest Greek manuscripts, is the stronger one
Mark 1:1	“the Son of God”	same, with a footnote (the BSB too)	An example of a variant that goes the way people do not expect
Luke 22:43 to 44	the angel and the sweat like blood	included, with a note (the BSB too)	Ancient (Justin and Irenaeus knew it), beloved, and missing from some of the oldest manuscripts. Worth an honest hour
Luke 22:19b to 20	the words of institution, “which is given for you… this cup is the new testament in my blood”	included (the BSB too, with a note at 22:20)	Some editions and translations of the late 1800s and 1900s set these words aside or dropped them. Current editions print them

What to notice when we report back

- Not one of these passages, if removed, takes a doctrine with it.
- The teachings in the disputed passages are taught elsewhere in undisputed text.
- Forgiveness of enemies, the Son of Man seeking the lost, the confession of faith before baptism, the deity of Christ: all of it stands on ground nobody contests.
- The additions are almost all understandable. A copyist filling out a phrase he knew from the next Gospel, or writing down what the church already prayed, was not attacking Scripture. He was too familiar with it.
- Your Bible told you. Every one of these is disclosed in the footnotes of the translations that omit them.

7. Working vocabulary

Keep this page. We will use these words all fall.

Autograph. The original document as the apostle or his secretary wrote it. None survive.

Manuscript. Any handwritten copy. Abbreviated MS, plural MSS.

Variant. Any place where manuscripts differ, including spelling.

Witness. A manuscript, an ancient translation, or a quotation in a church father that testifies to a reading.

Papyrus. Writing material made from a reed, used for the earliest copies. Papyri get a number with a P.

Uncial. A manuscript written in capital letters, the usual book hand from the fourth century to about the tenth.

Minuscule. A manuscript in a smaller, joined book hand, which replaced capitals in the ninth and tenth centuries. Most surviving Greek manuscripts are minuscules.

Lectionary. A book of Scripture readings arranged for the church year. Thousands survive, and they are witnesses too.

Textus Receptus. The printed Greek text that descends from Erasmus in 1516 and its successors. The basis of the King James New Testament. A printed edition made from a small number of late manuscripts, not a manuscript itself.

Majority Text. The reading found in the numerical majority of surviving Greek manuscripts, most of them medieval. Related to the Textus Receptus but not identical to it.

Critical text. A printed Greek text assembled by weighing all the witnesses. The Nestle-Aland and United Bible Societies editions are the current standard, and they are the basis of most modern translations.

Apparatus. The dense block of notes at the bottom of a Greek New Testament listing which manuscripts support which reading.

Conjecture. A proposed reading found in no manuscript at all. We will have very little use for these.

Lower criticism. Determining what the author wrote. The subject of this class.

Higher criticism. Theories about authorship, date, and sources. Not the subject of this class, and treated carefully when it comes up.

8. Before next Sunday

Read. The opening Apology and chapter 1, “Why Textual Criticism Matters,” of *Ad Fontes, Volume One*. Copies are available today. If you would rather not buy the book, say so and we will get you the chapter.

Do this one thing. Read one chapter of any Gospel and read every footnote on the page. Most of them are translation notes rather than textual ones, and learning to tell the two apart is half the skill. Bring one note you did not understand.

Bring. Your own Bible, whichever one it is, and if you have a second translation in the house, bring that too.

Think about. Where did your certainty about the gospel come from? Not where should it come from. Where did it actually come from? We will come back to that question at the end of the study, and

your answer now is worth writing down.

A closing word

Nothing in this study is going to take anything away from you. The apostles' words have come down to us through fire, persecution, bad handwriting, and a thousand years of monks with sore backs, and they are still here, in your lap, in your language. That is not an accident and it is not fragile. It is the ordinary way a faithful God keeps his promises.

We are going to look at all of it with the lights on.

> "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." Isaiah 40:8 (BSB)

Ad Fontes · Adult Sunday School · Grace Free Lutheran Church, Valley City, North Dakota · Larry Herzog Jr.

Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.