Ad Fontes, Week Two: You Have Been Doing This for Years

The Apology and Chapter 1: Why Textual Criticism Matters

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

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Week Two

Last week was orientation. This week we open the book: *Ad Fontes, Volume One: New Testament Textual Criticism for the Laity*. We cover the opening Apology and Chapter 1. The big claim of the day is a simple one: you have been trusting the work of textual critics every Sunday of your life, and that trust was well placed.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 15	Report back: the footnote you brought
15 to 22	Why the book opens with an apology
22 to 35	Romans 8:1 side by side
35 to 45	Ad fontes: Erasmus, Luther, and Revelation 22
45 to 53	The 400,000 variants number
53 to 63	Autographs and apographs
63 to 70	A taste of Mark 16, assignment, and closing

1. Report back: the footnote you brought

Last week you read a Gospel chapter and every footnote on the page. Most of those notes were about translation, not about manuscripts. Telling the two apart is the first real skill of this class, and it takes about ten minutes to learn.

Two kinds of notes

Kind of note	What it is telling you	Typical wording
Translation note	The Greek is clear, but there is more than one good way to say it in English	"Or…", "Greek…", "Lit.", "The Greek word means…"
Textual note	The manuscripts do not all agree on what the Greek says	"Some manuscripts add…", "Other ancient authorities read…", "The earliest manuscripts do not include…", and in the BSB, "BYZ and TR include…"

The test is one question: is the note arguing about the English, or about the Greek behind it? If the Greek itself is in question, it is a textual note, and it belongs to this class.

A tip for NET readers

The full edition of the NET Bible labels its notes for you. A note marked **tc** is text-critical. A note marked **tn** is a translator's note. A note marked **sn** is a study note. The free online NET at netbible.org shows all three.

As we go around the room

Read your note aloud, then say which kind you think it is and why. If we cannot tell, that is a good result too. It means the line between the two is sometimes thinner than it looks, and we will see why in later chapters.

2. Why the book opens with an apology

In its older sense, an apology is not "I'm sorry." It means "I owe you an account." That is the sense Plato used for Socrates, Justin Martyr used for the second-century church, and Melanchthon used for his Apology of the Augsburg Confession in 1531. The book's Apology gives an account of two decisions.

Decision one: written for the laity

The questions are already being asked in the pews, in pew language. They deserve pew answers: careful, honest, and theologically responsible, without six hundred hours of Greek as the price of admission.

The book draws a line between two kinds of work:

- **The technical work.** Weighing manuscript evidence in Greek, the work done by the editors of the Nestle-Aland text and the *Editio Critica Maior*. This book does not pretend to teach that.

- **The logic of the work.** What questions textual criticism asks, what evidence it weighs, what is at stake, and why a footnote reads the way it does. All of that is available in English, and all of it is yours.

There is a Reformation reason too. Luther did not put the New Testament into German so the laity could sit passively. He put it there so they could read the Word their pastors preached.

Decision two: written as a confessional Lutheran

Good lay books on this subject exist, and the book commends several. Nearly all of them come from evangelical or Reformed frameworks. When a Lutheran reads them, he absorbs their doctrine of Scripture along with their facts, often without noticing. The Lutheran tradition has its own resources here, especially in Pieper and Robert Preus, and this book puts them to work.

The load-bearing distinction

The Apology names one idea that carries the whole book: **inspiration of the autographs, and preservation in the manuscript tradition as a whole.** We meet it properly in section 6 today.

3. Romans 8:1 side by side

This is Chapter 1's worked example, and it is the whole discipline in one verse. Open two Bibles to Romans 8.

Translation	Romans 8:1
KJV	"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, **who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.**"
NET	"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
BSB	"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Now read down to verse 4 in both Bibles. The phrase about those "who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4 BSB) is there, in every manuscript.

Work it through in pairs

1. What does the note at 8:1 in your modern Bible say? (The BSB: "BYZ and TR in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." The ESV: "Some manuscripts add…")
2. Suppose the short reading is original. Can you explain how the long one arose?
3. Suppose the long reading is original. Can you explain why a copyist would drop a phrase about holy living?

4. Which story is easier to believe?

What most likely happened

A copyist working on verse 1 glanced down to verse 4, saw a phrase he loved, and carried it up, by accident or because it seemed to belong. His copy was copied, and the addition spread through a stream of later manuscripts. It reached the manuscripts Erasmus used in 1516, then the Textus Receptus, then the King James. The earliest manuscripts do not have it.

Nobody softened Paul. The modern translations are giving verse 1 back to Paul, and the phrase is still in your Bible, in verse 4, where he put it.

The rule of thumb you just used: the reading that best explains how the others arose is most likely the original. We will use that question every week.

4. Ad fontes: Erasmus, Luther, and Revelation 22

Textual criticism is not a modern liberal invention. It is the Reformation's own instinct, *ad fontes*, "to the sources," applied with more evidence than the Reformers had.

How the printed Greek text got to you

When	What happened
Today	Around 5,800 Greek manuscripts catalogued, some more than a thousand years older than anything Erasmus saw
1611	The King James New Testament, translated from the Textus Receptus
1521 to 1522	Luther, hidden at the Wartburg, translates the New Testament into German from Erasmus's Greek (his 1519 second edition), not from the Latin Vulgate
1516	Erasmus rushes the first published Greek New Testament to press in Basel, working from a small handful of late manuscripts

Luther set aside the Latin Bible he had memorized as a monk because a translation is only as good as its source. When a translation drifts, even an honored thousand-year-old one, you go back and check.

Open your Bible: Revelation 22:19

Erasmus had only one Greek manuscript of Revelation, and it was missing its last leaf. He filled the gap by translating the Latin Vulgate back into his own Greek.

Translation	Revelation 22:19
KJV	“God shall take away his part out of the **book of life**”
NET	“God will take away his share in the **tree of life**”
BSB	“God will take away his share in the **tree of life**”

The Greek manuscripts read “tree of life.” “Book of life” appears in no Greek manuscript before Erasmus wrote it. It came from his back-translation, passed into the Textus Receptus, and from there into the King James.

Why this matters

This is not a story told to embarrass Erasmus. The Reformation runs on his work. It shows why “the text the Reformers used” cannot be the standard for the text we use today. The Reformers bound themselves to a principle, not to a printing: go to the original and work from the best evidence you can find. Refusing to look at the manuscripts is the un-Reformational move.

5. The 400,000 variants number

The number is broadly accurate. The way it is usually used is not. You will hear it from Bart Ehrman’s *Misquoting Jesus* or from someone quoting him: 400,000 variants, more than there are words in the New Testament. Estimates actually run from 200,000 to 400,000 (Ehrman’s figures), and the most careful recent count, by Peter Gurry, puts the number near 500,000 even before spelling differences are counted.

What counts as a variant

A variant is any place where manuscripts differ, in any way. Here is how they sort out:

Kind of variant	Example	Changes your English Bible?
Spelling and slips	A name spelled with an extra letter; a word written twice	No
Changes that do not affect meaning	A Greek article before a name; words in a different order	No
Meaningful but not likely original	A reading found in one late manuscript	Rarely, and only in a footnote
Meaningful and possibly original	Romans 8:1, Mark 16:9 to 20	Yes, and your footnotes tell you

The overwhelming majority are still trivial. Daniel Wallace estimates that fewer than one percent of all variants fall in that last row. That is still a few thousand places, and most of those make only a small difference to the sense.

Two things to carry out of the room

1. **Not one of them overturns a doctrine.** The Trinity, the deity of Christ, justification by grace through faith, and the resurrection are all taught in passages whose text nobody disputes.
2. **More copies means more variants.** With ten manuscripts we would have few variants and little way to check anything. We have nearly six thousand in Greek, thousands more in ancient translations, and a flood of quotations in the church fathers. The same flood that produces the variant count is what lets us recover what the apostles wrote. No other book from the ancient world comes close.

6. Autographs and apographs

This is the heart of the book, and the Apology said so. Two Greek-rooted words carry it: **autograph**, the original as the apostle wrote it, and **apograph**, a copy made from it.

We confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings are "the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged" (FC Ep, Rule and Norm 1). That means the words the apostles actually wrote. So the question "do we still have them?" is one our own confession raises.

Two doctrines, kept distinct

	Inspiration	Preservation
Attaches to	The autographs	The apographs, the manuscript tradition as a whole
When	A fixed event: the moment Paul or his secretary put ink to papyrus	Two thousand years of copying and recopying
What it gives us	Originals without error	Copies that are faithful: the apostolic message kept in substance and in nearly all its details
What it does not claim	That any later copyist was carried along by the Spirit	That any one copy or edition is flawless

This two-part confession is Lutheran through and through. The book draws it from Francis Pieper and Robert Preus, who drew it from the seventeenth-century Lutheran teachers Quenstedt, Hollaz, and Calov.

No single witness is "the preserved Bible"

Not Codex Vaticanus. Not Codex Sinaiticus. Not Erasmus's 1516 edition. Not the Textus Receptus. Not the 1611 King James. Not Nestle-Aland 28. Each is a witness, some weightier than others, to a

text God has kept through the whole stream. Pinning preservation on one of them asks a printed book to do what only God's providence does.

Textual criticism is not rebuilding a Bible that was lost. It is tracing the shape of a Bible God has been keeping the whole time.

Confident on better grounds

There is a confidence that depends on never looking closely. It breaks in the first college class or the first skeptic's video. The confidence this book wants for you has seen the variants, knows about Mark 16 and the Comma, and still says, with reasons, that we have what the apostles wrote.

7. A taste of Mark 16

Open to Mark 16:8. The women flee the tomb, afraid, and tell no one. In most modern Bibles, a bracket or a note comes next. The BSB prints verses 9 to 20 in the running text with a note at verse 8. The King James runs straight on through verse 20.

The evidence, in brief:

- The two oldest complete or nearly complete New Testaments, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus (both fourth century), end Mark at verse 8. Vaticanus leaves the rest of the column blank, which suggests the scribe knew Mark could continue; what he thought of the ending is disputed.
- Eusebius, the fourth-century church historian, wrote that the longer ending was missing from almost all the accurate copies of his day.
- Other early manuscripts and versions omit the longer ending, have a different shorter ending, or carry notes saying some copies end at verse 8.
- The longer ending is written in a noticeably different Greek style from the rest of Mark.
- On the other side, the longer ending is in the vast majority of later manuscripts, was used by some early church fathers, and has been read in the church for centuries.

You do not have to decide today. Chapter 5 takes a whole week on it. For now, notice that the honest answer will be neither "the modern Bibles took it out" nor "obviously it isn't Scripture."

For discussion

1. Before today, had you ever read the textual notes in your Bible? What did you assume they were?
2. Romans 8:1 was changed by a copyist who loved Scripture, not one who hated it. Does that change how you think about the variants?
3. Why would a Lutheran want to learn this subject in Lutheran categories first, before reading other traditions on it?

4. The book says it wants you “confident on better grounds.” What were the grounds of your confidence before this class?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to last week’s page.

Apology. An account or defense, not an expression of regret. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession uses the word this way.

Ad fontes. Latin, “to the sources.” The rallying cry of the Renaissance and the Reformation, and the title of our book.

Apograph. A copy of an original document. Every New Testament manuscript we have is an apograph.

Erasmus. Dutch scholar who published the first Greek New Testament to reach the market, in 1516. Luther translated from his second edition.

Vulgate. The Latin Bible of the Western church for over a thousand years, associated with Jerome, who revised the Gospels; others revised the rest of the New Testament.

Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. The two oldest complete or nearly complete Greek New Testaments, both from the fourth century. You will hear these names every week.

Meaningful and viable. A variant that changes the sense of the text and has a real claim to be original. Fewer than one percent of variants.

Inspiration. God’s breathing out of the Scriptures through the prophets and apostles. It attaches to the autographs.

Preservation. God’s keeping of his Word through the whole tradition of copies. It attaches to the apographs taken together.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 2, “How We Got the New Testament.”

Do this one thing. The book’s own suggestion: read a short New Testament book in one sitting, such as Philippians, James, or 1 John. Read every footnote. Keep two tallies, one for translation notes and one for textual notes. Bring your count.

Bring. Your Bible, a second translation if you have one, and last week’s vocabulary page.

Think about. Luther left behind the Bible he had memorized because it was not the source. Is there anything you hold onto because it is familiar rather than because it is true?

A closing word

God did not give us a Bible that fell from heaven without a history. He gave us one we can trace, handed down through ordinary, public, checkable means, and kept whole in the hands of his church. That is not a weakness in our doctrine of Scripture. It is a gift. Thanks be to God, who gave us his Word, and gave us a Word we can study.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Psalm 119:105 (BSB)

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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.