Ad Fontes, Week Sixteen: What We Have, What We Don’t, and Why It’s Enough

Chapter 15: What We Have, What We Don’t, and Why It’s Enough

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

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

Week Sixteen

Our last week together. We did not learn a new Bible this fall. We learned to read the footnotes in the one we already had, and to stand on firmer ground when the questions come. Today we gather it up in three movements: what we have, what we do not have, and why what we have is enough. Then we go back to the question we asked on the first Sunday.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 15	Report back: the passage that stayed with you
15 to 22	Tischendorf at Sinai, one last time
22 to 31	What we have
31 to 39	What we don’t have
39 to 48	Why it is enough
48 to 57	Five questions you can now answer
57 to 63	Back to the Week One question
63 to 70	Where to go from here, and a benediction

1. Report back: the passage that stayed with you

Last week you chose the passage from this study that has stayed with you most, read it with its footnotes, and wrote how you read it differently now than in September. Share your sentence.

Listen for how often the answer is not “I trust it less” but “I understand it better.”

2. Tischendorf at Sinai, one last time

When	What happened
May 1844	Constantin von Tischendorf, a young Lutheran scholar, visits St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai and takes 43 leaves of an ancient Greek Old Testament to Leipzig. (His story of rescuing them from the kitchen fire is disputed by the monastery to this day.)
1853	He returns and finds nothing more
1859	With the backing of Tsar Alexander II, he is shown the rest: nearly the whole Greek Bible, Old and New Testaments, from the 300s. He takes it to St. Petersburg, on what he called a loan; the monks call it something else
1933	The Soviet government, short of cash, sells it to the British Museum for £100,000
1975	Twelve more leaves, and further fragments, turn up in a sealed room at St. Catherine's
2009	The Codex Sinaiticus Project reunites every surviving page online, free to all at codexsinaiticus.org

We have met this manuscript nearly every week: ending Mark at 16:8, lacking the woman caught in adultery and the Comma, reading "only God" at John 1:18, and "who" at 1 Timothy 3:16. It is not flawless, and it does not win every time (at Jude 5 it reads "the Lord"). But a Bible copied in the 300s, kept for some thirteen centuries in a desert monastery and brought to light just when the church needed it: that is preservation you can see.

3. What we have

Kind of witness	How many	Reaching back to
Greek manuscripts	About 5,800	The 100s (P52, though some date it later)
Early translations (Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and more)	Roughly 10,000 to 20,000	The late 100s
Quotations in the church fathers	A vast number (the often-repeated "over a million" has no published count behind it)	The early 100s

No other ancient book comes close.

We also have **five centuries of patient work**: from Erasmus's hurried edition of 1516, built on a handful of late copies, to the Nestle-Aland 28 of 2012, the UBS sixth edition of 2025, and the *Editio Critica Maior*, now complete for the Catholic Letters, Acts, Mark, and Revelation and still under way for the rest. Each generation had more evidence and better tools than the one before. The Greek text behind the BSB, ESV, NIV, NET, and CSB is the most carefully grounded text the church has ever had.

And we have **a pew Bible we can trust on examined grounds**. Not blind trust. Trust with reasons.

4. What we don't have

Honesty about what we have requires honesty about what we lack.

- **We do not have the originals.** Every autograph is gone, worn out and replaced by copies. This is the distinction we have used since Week One: inspiration belongs to what the apostles wrote; preservation runs through the copies.
- **We do not have certainty at every single spot.** The editors say so themselves with their A to D ratings. At a few places, like Luke 23:34 and 2 Peter 3:10, honest scholars still disagree, and the ending of Mark and the woman caught in adultery still have serious defenders.
- **We do not have a finished discipline.** New manuscripts are still catalogued every year. The UBS sixth edition (2025) has already refined the text, and the coming NA29 will carry that work forward. That is not instability; it is a field doing its job.
- **We do not have a way to be Christians who never face hard questions.** The questions will keep coming. This study did not make them stop. It gave us a way to meet them.

5. Why it is enough

Preservation. God has kept his Word in the whole stream of witnesses: papyri and great Bibles, Byzantine copies and the Textus Receptus, Latin and Syriac and Coptic, Origen and Cyprian and Augustine. Not in one manuscript or one printed edition, but in all of them together, read with care.

Sufficiency. Our Confession calls the prophetic and apostolic writings "the only rule and guiding principle" by which all teaching is judged (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm). Scripture as we have it is sufficient for that work.

No doctrine hangs by a disputed thread. Think back over the fall:

Passage in question	The truth it touches	Where that truth stands secure
Mark 16:9 to 20	Resurrection, commission, Baptism	Matthew 28; Luke 24; Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21
John 7:53 to 8:11	Christ's mercy to sinners	Luke 7; Luke 15; John 4

Passage in question	The truth it touches	Where that truth stands secure
1 John 5:7 to 8	The Trinity	Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14
John 1:18; 1 Timothy 3:16; Acts 20:28	The deity of Christ	The older text is bolder at John 1:18, less explicit at 1 Timothy 3:16, and agrees with the King James at Acts 20:28, but removes nothing: John 1:1; John 20:28; Colossians 2:9

What we have is enough because it is what God has given, and what God gives is what his church needs. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35 BSB).

6. Five questions you can now answer

Pair up. One partner asks the question the way a friend, grandchild, or coworker might. The other answers in two or three sentences, in plain words. Then switch. The short answers below are a starting point, not a script.

The question	A short answer
“Isn’t the New Testament full of 400,000 errors?”	Those are variants, not errors, and most are spelling and word order. Fewer than one percent both change the meaning and have a real claim to be original, and no doctrine rests on any of them. We have so many variants because we have so many copies.
“Did the modern Bibles take out verses?”	No verse was hidden. The translations kept every disputed passage in the text or the footnotes and told you why. The evidence shows the verses in question were added by copyists after the apostles wrote, some early and some very late.
“Why don’t you use the King James?”	It is a great translation, made from the best Greek available in 1611. We now have manuscripts more than a thousand years older than anything Erasmus saw when he made the Greek text behind it. The Reformers taught us to go to the sources, and we are doing what they did.
“Didn’t they remove the verse about the Trinity?”	The Comma in 1 John 5 appears in no Greek manuscript before the 1300s, and even Luther’s Bible left it out. The Trinity stands on Matthew 28:19 and many other passages.

The question	A short answer
“How can you trust a Bible scholars keep revising?”	They revise at the margins, a few words at a time, with their reasons in the open. Each generation’s text is better grounded than the last. That is care, not confusion.

7. Back to the Week One question

On the first Sunday we asked: **Where did your certainty about the Gospel come from?** Not where it should come from, but where it actually came from. Some of you wrote your answer down. Take it out now.

Here is where this study has tried to lead. Our certainty does not rest on a flawless copy, a perfect edition, or the last word of scholarship. It rests on promises attached to means: “This is My body, given for you.” “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” “Your sins are forgiven.” Those words have never been in doubt in any manuscript. The Christ who spoke them keeps them. The manuscripts are how he has handed them to us, and today we can see how faithfully he has done it.

The whole study at a glance

Week	Chapter	What to remember
1	Introduction	Textual criticism compares copies to recover what the apostles wrote. It is lower criticism, not higher
2	Apology and Ch. 1	You have been trusting this work all along; inspiration of the originals, preservation in the copies
3	Ch. 2	Papyrus, parchment, codex; how copyists slipped; P52
4	Ch. 3	From Erasmus to Nestle-Aland: a story of gain
5	Ch. 4	Which reading best explains the others? Weighed, not counted
6	Ch. 5	Mark ends at 16:8; nothing we confess is lost
7	Ch. 6	The woman caught in adultery: not John’s, but possibly Jesus’

Week	Chapter	What to remember
8	Ch. 7	The Comma came late and from the Latin; the Trinity is secure
9	Ch. 8	The older text is bolder at John 1:18, less explicit at 1 Timothy 3:16; Christ's deity stands either way
10	Ch. 9	The Lord's words: doxology, prayer from the cross, anger
11	Ch. 10	Missing verse numbers are an honest map
12	Ch. 11	The Western text: ancient, vivid, and not the apostles' own
13	Ch. 12	Greek first, translations confirming, fathers locating
14	Ch. 13	The Majority Text, heard fairly; brothers who disagree
15	Ch. 14	Three methods, one text, better documented and more candid
16	Ch. 15	What we have is enough

For discussion

1. What is one thing you believed about the Bible in September that you no longer believe, and one thing you believe more firmly now?
2. "Confident humility": confident in the Word God has kept, humble about the close calls. Where do you find that posture hardest to hold?
3. Who in your life needs to hear what you learned this fall? How will you tell them?

Where to go from here

None of these needs Greek.

Resource	What it gives you
The footnotes in your Bible (BSB, ESV, NASB, whatever you have)	The entry point. Read them now that you know what they mean
The Lutheran Study Bible (Concordia)	ESV notes with confessional Lutheran framing

Resource	What it gives you
The NET Bible's notes, free at netbible.org	The fullest textual notes of any English translation; look for notes marked "tc"
H. A. G. Houghton, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2025)	The editors' reasoning at every major variant, for the sixth UBS edition; it replaces Bruce Metzger's older commentary
Philip Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary*	A readable companion to Houghton and Metzger
Lexham Textual Notes on the Bible	A newer, lay-friendly guide to the variants
csntm.org and codexsinaiticus.org	Photographs of the great manuscripts, page by page
Tommy Wasserman and Peter Gurry, *A New Approach to Textual Criticism*	A short introduction to the CBGM

A closing word

Thanks be to God for the apostolic Word, written on perishable things, copied by faithful hands across two thousand years, and kept by the providence that gave it. Thanks be to God for the manuscripts and the translations and the fathers, for Erasmus and Tischendorf and the patient scholars still at work today. Thanks be to God for the Bibles in our laps, which we may now read with open eyes and settled hearts. And thanks be to God that what we have is enough: enough for faith, enough for the church's life, enough to bring us home, because it is the Word he has kept for his people.

Take what you have learned and read your Bible. Read it slowly. Read the footnotes. Hold the close calls lightly and the Word firmly. And when the questions come, answer them with patience, with honesty, and with joy.

Benediction

"May the LORD bless you and keep you; may the LORD cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the LORD lift up His countenance toward you and give you peace." Numbers 6:24 to 26 (BSB)

Soli Deo gloria.

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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.