

# A CONCISE GUIDE TO READING THE NEW TESTAMENT

*A Canonical Introduction*

David R. Nienhuis



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This book is dedicated to the many faithful  
witnesses who have helped  
to lead me along the way of the Word,  
including especially

Lanny and Diane, Cathy, Arvin and Barb,  
Ross, Dean, Rob, Frank, Gene,  
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# Acknowledgments

Teaching others is part of the life of **discipleship** (Matt. 28:19–20). As such, it is a practice involving equal parts imitation, adaptation, innovation, and, of course, **inspiration**. I do not know whether this book qualifies as innovative, though I’ve certainly tried to create something unique that would fill what I perceive to be a gap in the already saturated market of introductory texts. And I will of course leave it to others to determine what, if any of it, might be considered inspired (though it was certainly an inspiring experience to write it). What I can say without any reservation is that much of what you are about to read amounts to my own distinctive adaptation of what I have learned from those who have taught me how to read Scripture over the course of my life. This book is lovingly dedicated to all of them.

I am especially grateful for my many teachers. Like preaching, the instructive task of introducing complex material to the uninitiated is a distinctive ability that is learned, at least in part, by observing masters of the craft who ply their trade with grace and skill. Thus I owe a huge debt to the many teachers and scholars who have left their mark on me and my work.

Because this is an introductory, nonscholarly text, I have kept footnotes to a minimum. Nevertheless, readers should know that hardly a page goes by that isn’t influenced in one way or another by studies produced over the last thirty years by those working at the forefront

of the contemporary movement in biblical studies commonly known as “the theological interpretation of Scripture.” I am in their debt. This is perhaps most especially the case with Rob Wall, my friend, colleague, and collaborator at Seattle Pacific University. Many of the ideas I’ve put into play in this introductory book—especially those having to do with the interpretive significance of the actual sequence of biblical texts—were sharpened as a result of the rich body of scholarly work he has produced over the years.

On those occasions where I’ve been directly dependent on one of my teacher-colleague’s works, I’ve given credit in a footnote; otherwise I’ve let my words flow from the computer keys the way I would speak as a teacher in the classroom, communicating as openly as I could in the full knowledge that some variation of my words undoubtedly came first out of the mouths of one of my teachers. I suppose it is like this for every professor, but I’m grateful nonetheless. Of course, any half-truths, poorly conceived ideas, or outright falsehoods are my responsibility alone.

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I remain so very grateful for my students. These chapters have been tested out on a number of classes over the last year and a half (especially the 2014–15 sections of the Four Gospels, One Jesus course), and the feedback I’ve received from them has made this a far better book than it would otherwise have been. Among my students, particular thanks go to the members of my weekly small group: Adrienne Elliott, Maddie Haugen, Caitlin Heinly, Macie Mooney, Caitlin Tallungen, and especially Kierstin Brown and Jessie Comfort, who reviewed chapters and helped me think through relevant discussion questions. These amazing women have invited me into their personal lives and

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Last, though by far not least, is a word of gratitude to God. I am sometimes embarrassed by the privileged life I lead as a teacher and scholar of the Bible. The fact is, I make a modest yet very comfortable living teaching others about a Lord who gave up everything for my sake. I spend my days reading Christian Scripture in community with faithful others, sharpening and being sharpened. I get to walk alongside an apparently never-ending throng of bright and earnest emerging adults whose many questions about life keep my head busy and my heart tender. I often fear that I am getting more than I am giving. So I submit this book as an offering in humble gratitude to God for a good life I did little to earn. I do so in the hope that it would play some small part in God's far grander call for everyone to come and walk the way of the Word, that the peace of God might be spread far and wide across this troubled earth.

*Soli Deo gloria.*

David R. Nienhuis  
Seattle Pacific University  
Autumn 2016



# 1

## Introduction

### *The Form and Function of the New Testament Canon*

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#### Following the Way of the Word

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Each passing year sees the publication of more and more texts that aim to introduce students and laypeople to the **Bible** (see Glossary for terms in boldface). What could possibly justify the production of yet another book? Aren't there enough choices available already?

Those of us who teach the Bible to undergraduates and seminarians know that the answer is no, actually. Certainly there is a wide range of excellent and reputable texts to choose from. But teachers who work in contexts that are both academically serious and confessionally Christian face unique problems. On the one hand, we want our students to spend the bulk of their study time reading the Bible. On the other, there are so many introductory matters to cover in order to help students understand what they are reading that there often isn't enough time in a standard class period *both* to cover introductory concepts *and* to work through the text with students. Hence appears the need for an appropriate textbook to inform their homework experience.

But here is where a new and different set of problems arises. Most introductory textbooks seek to be as exhaustive as possible, addressing as many historical and literary elements of analysis as they are able. The result, obviously, is a large text with thick, substantive chapters. What professor wouldn't be happy with that? I was, for many years, until I discovered some things that concerned me. First, when given an assignment to read the introductory text along with sections from **Scripture**, I discovered too many students were reading the textbook and skimming (or skipping) the assigned Bible reading. Because students have limited time, they often default to what is perceived to be the shortest possible route to the goal. And because their educational experience has trained them to be assessment oriented, they perceive the goal to be a grade that is determined by homework and exams; so they rush to "the expert" to help them get "the important parts" instead of reading the Scripture on their own. This results in too many students spending their time reading *about* the Bible instead of actually learning to read the Bible themselves.

Second, most introductory textbooks present students with a Bible that differs rather sharply from the one received by the **church**. For centuries now, biblical scholarship has privileged the reconstruction of an "original context" for the biblical texts, using historical criteria as a means to regulate contemporary interpretive possibilities. One of the results of this project has been a dismantling of the Bible's final form. When it comes to the New Testament (NT), students learn that they should actually read Mark first, not Matthew, since the former is the earlier text. They learn that Luke and Acts should be rearranged to be read alongside each other as two parts of an authorial whole; that John's **Gospel** should be read alongside the Letters of John; that Paul's Letters should be rearranged to begin with 1 Thessalonians; and that there are indeed a number of letters attributed to Paul that are not actually written by him at all.

The inevitable result is the suspicion that there is something wrong with the Bible as we have received it. Whoever put it together must have arranged it incorrectly! Worse, they left out all the important historical information we need in order to make any sense of it. How could we ever understand the intention of the original authors without first being introduced to the social, cultural, religious, and political

realities that shaped the composition of their text and informed its reception by the original hearers? And who can provide us with this information but the academically trained expert in biblical studies?

Once students start thinking this way, a final realization creeps in. They discover that the quest to read the Bible “correctly” requires them to take it out of the hands of Christians, and out of the context of the church (which is, of course, the community that introduced most of them to the Bible in the first place) and place it instead into the hands of the scholarly expert, to be studied in the context of the university classroom.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the hope of most Christian institutions of higher education risks being thwarted: we require courses in the Bible in order to help our students become better Scripture readers and, hopefully, better Christians; but by replacing the Christian Scripture with the scholars’ Bible, we inadvertently create an existential chasm between students’ intellectual formation and spiritual formation. Confusion is the inevitable result when *what* they hear in class and read in their textbook is out of step with *how* they read in church and what they hear from the pulpit.

Of course, the actual use of the Bible in many churches presents a different set of problems. Some of my students attend popular non-denominational churches led by entrepreneurial leaders who claim to be “Bible believing” and strive to offer sermons that are “relevant” for successful Christian living. Unfortunately, in too many cases this formula results in a preacher appealing to a short text of Scripture, out of context, in order to support a predetermined set of “biblical principles” to guide the congregants’ daily lives. The only Bible these students encounter, sadly, is the version that is carefully distilled according to the **theological** and ideological concerns that have shaped the spiritual formation of the lead pastor.

On the other side of the continuum are more “traditional” churches, which use the readings from a **lectionary** in worship. Students who attend these churches—especially **Episcopalian**, **Roman Catholic**, and **Eastern Orthodox** students—typically encounter a huge amount of

1. The story of how the church’s Scripture was transformed into the scholars’ Bible is powerfully narrated by Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Scripture each Sunday, including an **Old Testament (OT)** reading, a **psalm**, a reading from the NT, and a passage from one of the four Gospels. These four readings are usually arranged **typologically**, with the first three chosen for their thematic correspondence with the assigned Gospel text. While students in these churches typically hear a lot of Scripture read over their lifetime, they often lack a detailed narrative framework for understanding how all these various texts fit together. They may be able to recognize Scripture when they hear it read, but they are usually unable to place the story they heard within the larger story of God narrated in the Bible.

A wide range of **Protestant** churches exists between these two poles, and many of their leaders labor to communicate the important role Scripture plays in the life of a Jesus follower. Students memorize the names of the biblical books in order. They learn the basic plotline of the larger biblical story. They are encouraged to set aside time each day for devotions. They memorize a variety of Bible verses. By the standards of most contemporary Christians, these students know their Bible well.

And yet these same students typically struggle in my classes as much as the others, if not more so. This is the case because most of them have been trained to be Bible *quoters*, not Bible *readers*. They have the capacity to recall a relevant biblical text in support of a particular doctrinal point, or in opposition to a hot spot in the cultural wars, or in hope of emotional support when times get tough. They approach the Bible as a sort of reference book, a collection of useful God-quotes that can be looked up as one would locate a word in a dictionary or an entry in an encyclopedia. What they are not trained to do is read a biblical book from beginning to end, to trace its narrative arc, to discern its main themes, and to wonder about how it shapes our faith lives today. Indeed, oftentimes these students find themselves dismayed when they read a beloved Bible quote in its actual literary context and discover that it does not seem to bear the meaning they thought it did when they quoted the verse in isolation.

To summarize, the problem as I see it is this: the university frequently introduces students to a Bible they don't recognize, and the church often teaches students to be devoted to a Bible they don't know how to read.

In my years of teaching I have found that what is most helpful is a kind of concise reading guide, one capable of providing a relatively straightforward bird's-eye view of the text to orient readers so they can get down to the business of building a life habit of reading the Bible carefully for themselves. This is precisely why Rob Wall and I partnered with our Scripture department colleagues at Seattle Pacific University to produce *The Compact Guide to the Whole Bible: Learning to Read Scripture's Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), and why I have gone on to compose this reading guide focused specifically on the NT.



The chapters of this book are held together by a thematic refrain that echoes throughout. I consistently refer to the form of the New Testament itself, as well as the contents of the story it tells, as *the way of the Word*. The logic behind that refrain can be stated simply:

The Bible, which has been provided for us to be the written Word of God, is intentionally designed to guide readers through a process of learning the way of Jesus, who is the embodied Word of God.

This conception of the Bible's intended purpose is grounded in the Bible's own articulation of Scripture's function: "All scripture is **inspired** by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in **righteousness**, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). These verses have far less to say about the *original authorship* of Scripture than about its *contemporary function*: Scripture's primary target is the **revelation** of God for the formation of faith.

The subtitle describes this book as *A Canonical Introduction*. What makes a NT introduction **canonical**? Four orienting convictions drive the reading articulated here: a canonical introduction will read the Bible as *Scripture*; it will approach the Bible as an authoritative *collection*; it will privilege the interpretive significance of the Bible's *final form*; and it will focus on the Bible's function as a *faith-forming narrative*. Each of these convictions requires further elaboration before we can start our journey on the way of the Word.

## Reading the Bible as Scripture

Christians turn to the Bible for a number of different reasons. Some do so to gather biblical support for doctrinal positions. Others search it for propositional truth claims that can be used in arguing political or ethical matters. Still others seek inspirational quotations or stories in search of emotional support. All of these readers undoubtedly conceive of the Bible as an authoritative text, but they are not necessarily approaching the Bible as Scripture.

Reading the Bible as Scripture requires a recognition of the Bible's orienting identity. The Bible is the **canon** of Christian Scripture, a collection of **holy** writings set apart by God's people in recognition of their Spirit-empowered capacity to mediate the transforming presence of God to the community of faith. Those who approach the Bible as Scripture, then, do so in company with faithful others in order to be transformed by God. They will be less interested in having their own questions answered than in opening themselves up to the questions God has in store for them. They will not think of the Bible as a tool to be used like an inert object, but as a divinely appointed setting for encountering a living Subject (i.e., God). In short, reading the Bible as Scripture involves approaching it as an act of worship.

This means, then, that the church is the appropriate setting for reading the Bible. In using the word "church," I do not merely refer to the buildings we gather in on Sunday mornings, but to the trans-historic community of God's people who received this text long ago and have been gathering to attend to its message ever since. Yet I do not mean to say that the classroom, the living room, or the bus is somehow the *wrong* location for reading. No, reading the Bible with the church means reading the Bible knowing that we are always reading in company with a very particular community. It means reading as members of a body, knowing that interpretive meaning is discovered in conversation, not in isolation. It requires an awareness of the contemporary diversity of that body, knowing that we will never be transformed if we read only with those who already support our biases and presuppositions. It means keeping the church's ancient **theological** agreements (often called the **rule of faith**) in mind as we read, knowing that the powerful variety of Scripture's witnesses

may lead us apart from one another if we do not read with the hope of fulfilling **Christ's** prayer that his followers "may all be one" (John 17:21).

Chief among these theological agreements is a proper understanding of the God who brought Scripture into being and speaks through it today: this is the Creator of all things, the faithful **covenant** partner to Israel who became flesh in Jesus and comes to us today by means of the Holy Spirit, who takes away our bent toward sinning and sets our hearts at liberty for service to God.

Thus, this book will not include extensive historical analyses of the factors that brought individual NT texts into being. We do not presume that a singular "real meaning" is hidden away in a past "original context" that must be unearthed by a professional historian. In place of reconstructed portraits of ancient authors and original audiences to whom we no longer have direct access, the reader will find a close analysis of the text that stands before us, with one reader's careful reflection on what the Word has to teach us about the way of Christ and how the Holy Spirit might help us walk in that way today.

### **Approaching the Bible as a Collection**

The previous section identified the Bible as the canon of Christian Scripture. The word "canon" comes from a Greek word used initially to describe a "rule" (as in a ruler with which one measures things). Over time it came to refer to an official, approved "list" or "collection" of authorities by which truth might be measured. To approach the Bible as a canon, then, is to read it in the recognition that the Bible is actually an authoritative book full of books, a collection of writings edited together into a unified whole.

The Bible's "collectedness" bears a number of important implications for our reading. Just as approaching the Bible as Scripture disallows interpretation in isolation from other Christians, so also approaching the Bible as a canon disallows the reading of one biblical text in isolation from another. Though each book of the Bible had its own discrete origin in a particular place and time, they were each ultimately received as parts of a canonical whole in the expectation

that they would continue to be read as such. Thus, reading Matthew in canonical context leads us to spend less time considering its point of historic composition and more time on the logic of its placement in the canon: How does Matthew help us transition out of the Old Testament and into the New? How does Matthew prepare the way for Mark? What is Matthew's distinctive contribution to the fourfold Gospel collection?

These sorts of questions presume that the placement of the NT books is the result of intentional choices on the part of the ancient collectors. There is, in fact, plenty of evidence in support of such a claim. But first, to whom are we referring when we speak of "the ancient collectors"? Much could be said here, but for our purposes a brief explanation will have to do.<sup>2</sup> Though it was common in the past to search for this or that figure or crisis that instigated the formation of the NT canon, it is now widely recognized to have been a far more multifaceted and organic process. In the decades following their initial composition, the texts that would eventually form the NT were copied and disseminated to churches across the Mediterranean world. In this context illiteracy was the norm, and reading and writing was a professional skill. Since the copying of texts was extremely costly, only the most highly valued documents could be reproduced. While it is clear that a wide variety of ancient Christian texts were deemed valuable at one time or another in this or that corner of early Christendom, the ones that survived long enough to be deemed "canonical" were those that (1) emerged from the earliest generation of **apostles**, (2) gained the widest recognition of scriptural authority, and (3) combined well together with others to communicate the whole apostolic story of God's salvation in Christ and through the Spirit.

This "decision," if it can be called that, came about as the result of a collective and gradual process guided by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, when thinking of how the process played out, "discernment" ends

2. Anyone interested in the history of NT canonization should start with what has become the classic text on the subject, Bruce Metzger's *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, repr. 1997). For a more detailed and updated account of the formation of the whole Christian Scripture, see Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).



up providing a better conception than “decision.” As far as we can tell from the written testimony of early **church fathers**, the indirect witness of the **scribes** who published the texts, and the evidence of intentional design in the NT we have received, we gather that apostolic writings initially circulated among the churches in smaller collections of varying size and shape. These were subjected to a long process of arrangement and rearrangement: individual texts entered the emerging canon by means of subcollections that were tested over generations of use in the worshiping communities until a final contents and sequence gained purchase across the majority of churches. By the time powerful church leaders stepped up in the later 300s to bring the canonization process to a close, the decisions were mostly already made for them: the “canon lists” of the mid- to late-fourth century show widespread acceptance of a collection very closely resembling the very same NT canon we have today.<sup>3</sup>

The final form of the NT, then, is neither accidental nor incidental. Indeed, the Word as it has come down to us appears to have a way to it, a reading logic designed to form readers into the sort of **disciples** capable of hearing the Spirit as the Spirit leads them along the way of Jesus.

### The Interpretive Significance of the Bible’s Final Form

The NT abounds with evidence pointing to the intentionality of its design. Two types of evidence, historical and artistic, can be offered to convince us of the meaningfulness of the canon’s final shape.

The historical evidence can be categorized into internal and external types. Internal evidence (that is, evidence discerned from the form and contents of the NT itself) shows that the NT texts were carefully arranged according to a narrative structure that was imposed by the

3. The primary differences, where they existed, had mostly to do with (a) whether or not to include Revelation; (b) whether to include all seven Catholic Epistles (CE) or only James, 1 Peter, and 1 John; and (c) whether to place the Pauline Letters immediately after Acts, as was the habit in the West, or after the CE, as was the habit in the East. Most of these issues will be addressed in one way or another in the chapters that follow. Suffice it to say at this point that the *contents* at least of the NT canon were widely agreed upon by the fifth century.

editors: the canon begins with the story of God’s work in Jesus (the four Gospels), follows with the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of the church subsequent to Jesus’s **ascension** (the Acts of the Apostles), continues with the story of the first churches as communicated through twenty-one apostolic letters, and concludes with a vision of God’s **consummation** of all things in the Revelation to John. This structure does not correspond at all with the historical emergence of these individual texts: if it did, most of the letters would come *before* the Gospels. As it stands, the individual texts have been artistically arranged into larger subcollections designed to communicate the story of the Creator God’s work in Christ and the Holy Spirit to bring about the restoration of all creation.

Though the external historical evidence is admittedly sparse, what we do have also provides us with insight into the meaningfulness of the final form. Indeed, throughout this book we will consider the words of the church fathers from the early centuries who bear witness to the development of our canon. We will learn, for instance, that John, which is so very different than the other three Gospels (which are typically called the **Synoptic Gospels**<sup>4</sup>), comes at the end of the Gospel collection to function as a closing “spiritual” reflection on the story of Jesus. We learn that Acts was separated from Luke in order to function as an introduction to the NT letter collection. We will learn one leader’s view that the **Catholic Epistles** (CE) collection was added because a “perplexing problem in the writings of the Apostle Paul”<sup>5</sup> was leading some readers to believe that one could have faith without also being obedient. Complete historical clarity is lacking, of course, but by paying attention to the reflections of those who lived in the days of the canon’s formation, we gain insight into its nature and function.

There is also clear artistic evidence of design within the subcollections. For example, consider the fourfold Gospel collection. As we will see, though Matthew’s Gospel does not appear to have been the first Gospel written, it comes first in the canon because it is the one most

4. Since the nineteenth century, Matthew, Mark, and Luke have been called Synoptic Gospels because they share a common view of Jesus’s words and deeds.

5. Augustine, *Faith and Works*, in *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*, trans. Marie Ligouri, ed. R. J. Deferrari, Fathers of the Church 27 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 213–82.

capable of transitioning readers out of the OT and into the New. It also sets the stage well by offering readers the clearest portrayal of the call to discipleship. This relatively straightforward Gospel is followed by Mark, which sounds a cautionary note to emphasize the dark side of discipleship: ours is a Lord who came to die on a cross and calls us to do the same. Luke then follows to expand the scope of God's salvation, showing that this Lord is not simply the **Messiah** of Israel, but also the Savior of the whole world. John then concludes the Gospel collection with an extended meditation on Jesus's identity as the Word of God, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life, the one means of access to God. We can see, then, that the four Gospels combine to tell us the whole story of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel (Matthew) who came to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark) so that everyone in the whole world (Luke) would find salvation in him (John).

There is also the simple fact that there are *four* Gospels. Though modern readers tend to think of number symbolism as insignificant, ancient readers believed numbers corresponded to spiritual realities. Ancient Jews noted with fascination how God provided detailed instructions for the building of things like Noah's ark (Gen. 6), the temple and its accessories (Exod. 25–27), and even the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21). After all, if God is the Creator of all things, it must mean that we can learn about God by studying the actual form of things that God makes. The number four, it turns out, was understood to be the number symbol for created things. So just as there are four points on the compass, four physical elements (earth, water, wind, and fire), four rivers in the paradise of creation (Gen. 2:10–14), four points on the cross, and four creatures attending God in the visions of Ezekiel and John (Ezek. 1; Rev. 4), it makes perfect sense that there should be four *created* Gospels to articulate the one gospel of Jesus Christ.

After the Gospels comes the Acts of the Apostles. This book tells the story of the earliest church as it grew and spread abroad by the power of the Holy Spirit working in its midst. In particular, it tells the story of the earliest Jewish Christian mission to Jews in and around Jerusalem (chaps. 1–8), its scattering abroad because of persecution (chap. 8 and following), its expansion among **gentiles** (chaps. 10–14), and the eventual development of a full-blown mission to the gentile world (chaps. 15–28). This sets the stage for the letters that follow:

the latter half of Acts is almost entirely about the apostle Paul in order to prepare us to read his letters. After the Pauline collection we return to where Acts started by reading letters from the leaders of that first Jewish mission (the letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude). The canon then concludes with the Revelation to John, which tells the story of God's victorious conclusion of salvation.

Once again, number symbolism matters. The church fathers often noticed that Paul's thirteen letters address *seven* churches—Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica. The Catholic Epistles, which follow Paul, offer up *seven* letters of their own. Finally, as if to crown the sequence, the Revelation to John begins with the risen Lord Jesus addressing seven letters to seven churches. Since seven is the biblical number for completion and perfection, the numerical form of the apostolic letters is reflective of a complete and perfect communication of apostolic teaching.

Then also, the number three is the number of divinity, reflecting the three persons of God. There are twenty-one letters in the NT (three sets of seven), and the pattern of seven repeats three times (Paul to seven churches, seven Catholic Epistles, seven letters to seven churches in Revelation). On top of all that, the number seven is the product of four plus three, as if to suggest that the God who is one in *three* has inspired the *fourfold* Gospel to produce all these perfect apostolic *sevens*.

In sum, the sequence of NT books is meaningful, and reading the books in sequence communicates a message that is greater than the sum of its constituent parts. Each chapter that follows, then, will open with a “canonical transition” section that highlights the meaningfulness of the transition from one book or collection to the next. As we will see, these texts can be seen to hang together like links on a chain, or better, like way markers on a trail leading the reader further along the path of discipleship.

### **The Bible's Function as a Faith-Forming Narrative**

The books of the NT are not disinterested, journalistic stories reporting ancient events from an unbiased point of view. All of them

are driven by a single agenda: the formation of faith in the lives of those who read. At every point the NT texts call out to the reader to make decisions, to rethink positions, to increase faith, and ultimately to follow the call of God in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Near the conclusion of the fourfold Gospel, the author says,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

So also Acts opens with Jesus telling his disciples, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8), and Paul, in his turn, opens his collection of letters with the claim that he has been charged “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name” (Rom. 1:5). Everywhere we turn in the NT, we are reminded that Scripture’s function is the equipping of God’s people so that everyone will be ready to perform the good works God has called us to do. We might even go so far as to say that Scripture was formed in order to be performed by those who read it. As it turns out, narrative is the perfect mode of discourse for achieving this end.

Modern biblical scholarship’s myopic focus on historical reconstruction had the effect of obscuring the now widely recognized fact that the Bible is, at its base, a story. Even the nonnarrative elements of the text (like legal code, proverbs, or letters) are only meaningful to us because they have the larger biblical story as their backdrop. Our older, more rationalistic orientation toward the Bible led us to seek deeper, propositional truths buried beneath the surface of the biblical narrative. What we have learned, of course, is that no moral or summary of a story can take the place of the story itself. Stories, it turns out, are “irreducible”: they cannot be distilled down into a purer, simpler, “truer” form. We can try to explain them, summarize them, or turn them into timeless “principles,” but doing so will always be an attempt to turn the story into something other than what it is in itself.

The irreducibility of narrative makes it one of the most powerful forms of discourse that humans possess. Stories do not provide us

with simplistic answers to life. Instead, they spark the imagination and evoke our capacity to wonder; in doing so, they ignite a personal meaning-making process in the reader. There are many reasons for this, but one of the more important is the fact that stories provide us with a vicarious experience of life. The word “vicarious” comes from the Latin word for “substitute”; stories allow us to experience the feelings or actions of another person in the realm of the imagination. Whether the story is about something real or imaginary, good stories temporarily provide us with a substitute existence: they present us with realistic characters in situations we can relate to; we come to love them or hate them, worry about them or wonder what they’re going to do; we experience pleasure when they surprise us, anger when they are abused, disgust when they abuse others, and shock when they do something unexpected. And as we observe this substitute life, we cannot help but reflect on the story of our own lives. We learn from their choices, and if they are good characters, we are inspired by their virtue. Stories immerse us temporarily in a world other than our own, and in doing so, they provide us with a deeper understanding of our own identities, values, choices, and purpose.

The gospel is a particularly potent story. In it Jesus is presented as the Word of God who “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14), the Creator taking the form of a creature like us, one who lived a life like our own as an example, so that we “should follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). As we read his story, we are inspired by the truth of his message and his life, and thus he becomes our hero, our model, our Lord. We also read about others as they follow his way. Some are able to do so, others fail miserably, most stumble along as best they can—and through it all our conception of what it might be like for *us* to follow is clarified. The story of earliest Christianity provided in the NT offers us models for how Christianity is embodied and practiced in the real world. And as we immerse ourselves in this life-shaping story, as we return to it again and again, reading in order to let it spur our imagination and generate our meaning-making, we are slowly transformed: a story about a God who became flesh for our sake ends up being made flesh in our daily lives.

Calling Christianity a story-shaped performance might lead us to suppose that the imitation of Christ is a simple matter of repeating

his words and replicating his deeds. But real life doesn't work that way, not least because our world is so considerably different from the one into which Jesus was born. It is not enough to quote Jesus (or one of his apostles) in response to a particular situation; the story calls us to *embody* Jesus, participate in his life, and take up his character as our own. This is undoubtedly what Paul means when he says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:19–20). Paul does not mean he has literally been crucified as Jesus was; he means he is living his life according to the pattern of the one who loved us so much that he gave his life away to save others.

No, the Christian life is not to take the form of a wooden impersonation of Jesus (as if we could do that anyway!). The faith-forming narrative of Scripture provides us with a plotline within which we may orient our own lives today. We are disciples, no less so than Peter or John or Thomas. We are the church, no less so than the people of Philippi or Rome or Corinth. We are the **saints** yearning together with the **martyrs** of Revelation that Jesus will come again to destroy death once and for all. We read these stories as our own; the characters we encounter hold up a mirror before us. We learn from their mistakes, internalize their virtues, and take their hope as our own, so that we might assume our rightful place as characters playing our part in the unfolding drama of God's **reconciliation** of all things.



The book you are reading approaches the NT as a holy book that was intentionally formed by a particular community to function as a faith-forming narrative. The NT is a word with a distinctive way to it, a literary path designed to lead readers along the living way of the Word, who is Christ Jesus our Lord. The goal is neither to unearth a history of "what really happened" way back when, nor to memorize powerful verses and distill timeless principles for life, but to hear the call to take up the way of the Word for ourselves, to let it sink in until we are able to embody his character in our lives, in the hope that we might participate in the **redemption** that God is bringing into being.

What all this means is that it isn't enough for Christians to emphasize the authoritative character of the Bible. We must also attend very carefully to the character of those who read it. If the Bible is indeed *Scripture*, a holy text set apart by God, then we must approach it with the humility of those who are seeking to have their lives and their world changed. We must speak the truth to one another, being quick to confess our shortcomings and even quicker to overlook those of others, knowing that "love covers a multitude of sins" (James 5:19–20; 1 Pet. 4:8). If the Bible is indeed the *church's* Scripture, we must develop the sort of character traits that will enable us to approach the task with honest relational openness, knowing that God is addressing all of us, not just me and my self-selected tribe of those who already agree with me. This is precisely why the Lord placed the **Communion** table at the center of our worship: it is absolutely imperative that Christians be the sort of people who are capable of sitting together with those with whom we disagree. If the Bible is indeed a *collection of different texts intentionally formed together* to communicate a whole truth about God, it means we must develop the patience to linger long before the mirror of the Word—to struggle through its varieties, its puzzles, and its challenges—and to stay put until we are transformed from mere hearers into "doers of the word," whose creed actually matches our deeds (James 1:22–25).

In short, if the Bible is indeed a faith-forming narrative, as this introduction assumes it is, we must approach it with open ears and open hearts, ready to be transformed. No other posture will do if we are to take up the way of the Word as our way of life.

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### Questions for Discussion

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1. Having read this introduction, what questions do you have? What do you want to know more about? Make a list to share with your class or reading group.
2. How does this approach to the Bible differ from the approach(es) you've learned? What is to be gained by following this approach? What sort of assumptions might need to be given up?