

The Case for Christianity

Session 1 – Overview

Fellowship

The host opens the meeting with prayer.

Briefly share with each other an update about what's been going on in your life. Share a "high" and a "low" from the past week or two.

Learning God's Ways

The Publicity

Over the past 2000 years, questions about Jesus and the faith we call "Christianity" have been rampant. Doubters have attacked the historical record. Skeptics have assaulted the person of Christ. New fads have tried to corrupt the teachings of the Bible. It never stops! That's why every believer has to be ready to defend the faith. Remember, God doesn't need our defensive efforts. Defending the faith is a way to open the door of sharing the truth with others. As you "give answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" with "gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15), you will be opening the door of eternal life to ones in need.

- What religious crazes or fads can you recall?
- What makes these fads "fizzle out" after a while?

Our world promotes the idea that truth is relative—there is no absolute truth. Because of this errant teaching (if it was true, it would be impossible to make such a definitive statement. With no absolute truth, no one could claim there was no absolute truth!), almost any belief is allowed to be perpetuated and promoted without opposition or public debate. These days people are afraid to oppose anything!

What is the truth? What are the facts? Is there anything we can be certain about?

- Read 1 Peter 1:24-25. What does this verse say about fads compared to God's Word?
- Read Hebrews 13:8. Talk about what this verse means in relationship to the changing times, the changing crazes, and the changing needs that we have.
- Talk about whether or not you think religious fads pose a threat to faith in Jesus. Explain your opinion.

The Purpose

The "buzz" caused by religious fads causes us to dig into important life and faith issues. That's what this study is about: Examining the truth of God's Word, studying key doctrines of the Christian faith, and shaping an effective and meaningful Christian witness.

- Read Colossians 4:4-6. What do these verses say about how you are to treat people who have different views than you do?
- Discuss a unique or surprising opportunity you've had to talk about your faith.

- What does the Apostle Paul mean when he mentions conversation “seasoned with salt”? How does that impact your conversation with others?

Big questions and religious fads grab the attention of millions of people. Instead of lamenting the controversial subjects, believers can rejoice in the opportunities to learn, to grow, and to share the news of Jesus. Who knows how God will use this to reach into some “unreachable” places with the life-transforming message of Jesus Christ?

The Plot

New religious stories, questions, and beliefs spring up all the time. The approaches are always unique, but none of them is really new.

- Read Colossians 2:8. Some people are accepting the latest religious fads as fact. Discuss why this happens.
- Read 2 Timothy 4:1-5. What parts of these verses match up with the phenomenon of religious assaults?
- What challenges do these verses give you when it comes to your response?

Encouragement for Life and Ministry

Reflect on today’s study and encourage each other in your Christian walk and in your service to God and His people.

Intercession and Prayer

Close with a prayer that sums up your time together and that lifts up the needs of the group.

Evangelism

Remember that God calls you to reach out and may be leading you to invite someone to your group.

The Case for Christianity

Session 2 – The Bible

Fellowship

The host opens the meeting with prayer.

Briefly share with each other an update about what's been going on in your life. Share a "high" and a "low" from the past week or two.

Learning God's Ways

Is the formation flimsy?

It's the living Word (Hebrews 4:12), a lamp to our feet and light to our path (Psalm 119:105), the truth revealed by God (John 17:17). But even though millions of people read the Bible regularly, few are able to articulate exactly how the Bible came into existence. This lack of knowledge opens the door for confusion—especially if inaccurate stories are told. Some people claim that the Bible is a product of human beings who had hidden agendas. They say that the Bible is just like any other book. Some even say that the Bible has little or no value today.

History, however, has a different story. The Bible was written by 40 different authors from 3 continents over a period of 15 centuries, yet there is one common message. The two major languages of the original writing were Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament. The first five books of the Old Testament are called the "Books of Moses." Moses recorded the beginnings of God's interaction with His people. He also had recorded the Exodus and entry into the Promised Land. These books are also called the Torah, or the books of the Law. The writings of Psalms, Proverbs, Kings, Chronicles, etc. are products of various authors who walked with God in faith. The prophetic writings were recorded to bring the message of repentance to a rebellious nation. God showed His presence with His kings and prophets in vivid ways, therefore these books of the Bible were accepted as God's words. The Old Testament came together and was accepted long before Christ was born.

The New Testament was assembled throughout the first century by believers as they sought information on Jesus' life, and as they sought to grow in faith. The acceptance of the New Testament as the inspired Word of God happened rather quickly. 2 Peter 3:16 shows how Peter regarded Paul's writings: "*He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*" Peter calls Paul's writings "Scriptures."

The early Christians did not move quickly to establish an accepted "Bible." Instead, there was a widespread acceptance of the firsthand accounts of Jesus' life and teachings contained in the New Testament. When heretics started attacking these writings, however, Christian leaders gathered a list of books that were commonly and widely accepted as God's Word. In 140 A.D. Marcion published his New Testament, tossing out references to Jews. A backlash erupted reinforcing the accepted New Testament books. In 188 A.D. Irenaeus mentioned the four Gospels in their current order. He said, "I take it that there are neither more nor fewer than these four Gospels" (Brent McGuire, "The Lutheran Witness," June 2004, p.5). In 200 A.D. the Muratorian Canon was published—nearly a complete list of the current New Testament. We actually have in our possession complete copies of the Bible as we know it dating back to 350 A.D.—the Codex Sinaiticus (London), and Codex Vaticanus (Rome).

One thing is clear; no human being or humanly constructed organization initiated the formation of the Bible. God was at work shaping and preserving His Word throughout the centuries.

- Read 2 Timothy 3:16. What does this verse say about the Bible?
- Read 2 Peter 1:16-21. What do these verses tell you about the Bible?

Is the evidence sketchy?

While some critics characterize the Bible as a set of documents on shaky ground, evidence for the historical accuracy of the Bible is overwhelming. The New Testament alone has nearly 5000 original language manuscripts from the New Testament. There are a total of more than 24,633 manuscripts from widespread areas and languages documenting its validity. Compare that to Plato's writings (7 pieces of manuscript evidence), Aristotle's writings (only 49 pieces of manuscript evidence), and Shakespeare (a mere 600 pieces of manuscript evidence). We also have very accurate copies of the various Old Testament manuscripts that date back to the 200's B.C. We have copies of New Testament manuscripts that date to within 20-30 years of the original composition. The source material for the Bible is very accurate and very well preserved! External evidence is overwhelming!

Consider this quote from Josh McDowell in his study, "Evidence for Faith":

"You can take every Bible in the world and destroy it; take every manuscript and burn it. Within 150 to 250 years of Jesus Christ I can reconstruct all but eleven verses of the New Testament. You say, 'How?' The early church fathers and scholars, when they wrote articles and they preached, they would, in their notes, copy scripture. And you can go back and take the writings of the early church fathers where they quoted scripture, and reconstruct all but eleven verses...I have now been able to document eighty-six thousand quotations for the New testament" (1983, p.57).

- Read 2 Kings 22:3-20; 23:1-3. This section of the Bible recounts the re-discovery of the Bible (probably the first five books of the Bible, the Torah). What does this account tell you about how God preserves His Word?
- What do these verses tell you about the value God has for His Word?
- What do these verses tell you about what God desires our attitude toward His Word to be?

Is the Bible's self-image wishy-washy?

The historical formation of the Bible is solid and driven by God. The external evidence makes the Bible THE most well documented piece of ancient literature in history. But what about the Bible itself? Is it a book filled with humanly-constructed myths, inconsistencies, and religious mumbo jumbo?

Hardly. The Bible is uniquely factual and authoritative in its tone and content. All you have to do is read it to see God's fingerprints of formation.

- Read Genesis 1:1-13. Think about other "religious" writings (Greek mythology, Eastern god epics, contemporary "new age" writings, etc.). How is the Bible different from these writings?

The reading from Genesis is a sample of the creation account in the Bible. Note that it is not a wild, mythical account of the formation of the world. It's pretty dry and factual. The style of writing in Genesis chapter one is called Hebrew narrative. The goal of Hebrew narrative is to transmit facts in an accurate way. While other "religious" writings contain wild epic accounts of the activity of the gods, the

Bible is written as a clear, factual, historical account. By its very construction, the Bible presents itself as historical fact.

- Read Isaiah 53:3-11. What is this Old Testament account talking about? Connect as many details of the verse as possible to your answer.

The verse you just read is an example of one of the hundreds of Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

- Discuss how the Old Testament prophecies of Jesus validate the authority and accuracy of the Bible (for more examples of prophecies look at Psalm 22:16 & 18, Psalm 69:21, Isaiah 7:14 & 11:1, Jeremiah 23:5, Micah 5:2, Zechariah 9:9 & 11:13b).

The Biblical writing style along with the fulfilled prophecies show that the Bible is clearly a unique and authoritative book—the Word of God! But there’s more. The Bible bears witness to its own authorship, truth, and benefits.

Read the verses below. After you read each verse, comment on what the Bible says about itself.

- Deuteronomy 8:3
- Psalm 119:105
- Isaiah 40:8
- John 17:17
- Romans 10:17
- Ephesians 6:17
- Hebrews 4:12

Is this a book like any other book?

In addition to manuscript evidence, historical evidence, and internal evidence, the Bible is validated by one archaeological find after another. The evidence God has provided for His Word is absolutely amazing! Believers in Christ and secular authorities agree that this book is authentic and accurate.

But the Bible isn’t simply a well-documented historical work. It’s not just another book on the “religion” section shelf at Barnes and Noble. The purpose of the Bible far surpasses the purpose of any ordinary book. The Bible is a living Word that reaches hearts and impacts lives for eternity!

Ask the question, “What is the main purpose of the Bible?” and you’ll get a variety of answers. “It tells the history of God’s people.” “It teaches God’s ways.” “It shows right and wrong.” “It tells about the life of Jesus.”

These answers are true, but they are not the complete truth about the main purpose of the Bible.

- Read Luke 24:25-27, 44-45. What do these verses say about the main purpose of the Bible (remember, these verses are talking about the Old Testament!)?
- Read John 20:30-31. What insight do these verses give you about the main purpose of the Bible?
- Read Romans 1:16. What does this verse tell you about the main purpose of God’s Word?

There is no doubt, God preserved His Word for an amazing purpose! If you’re interested in reading the Bible, consider this plan:

Start with one of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John). You'll learn about Jesus' life. Then read Galatians through Colossians. These are short letters to Christians with great teaching for faith and daily life. Next, go back to Acts, the story of how Christianity began. Then read Genesis. It's the first book of the Bible with key teachings about life and God's work. Then read Romans in the New Testament. After that, keep going with books of your choice. Be ready for an adventure and for blessing!

Encouragement for Life and Ministry

Reflect on today's study and encourage each other in your Christian walk and in your service to God and His people.

Intercession and Prayer

Close with a prayer that sums up your time together and that lifts up the needs of the group.

Evangelism

Remember that God calls you to reach out and may be leading you to invite someone to your group.

The Case for Christianity

Session 3 – The Bible, continued

Fellowship

The host opens the meeting with prayer.

Briefly share with each other an update about what's been going on in your life. Share a "high" and a "low" from the past week or two.

Learning God's Ways

The Gnostic Gospels?

One set of ancient documents continues to be thrust into the limelight when it comes to Biblical criticism. They're called the "Gnostic Gospels."

The common critical claim is that a multitude of first-century Gospels were in existence, and that the church carefully selected writings that backed up its own notion of who Jesus should be. The assertion, however, isn't true!

Gnosticism had its beginning well before the time of Jesus. It was a movement that emphasized acquiring mystical knowledge (the word "gnosis" is the Greek word for knowledge). Discovering divine secrets and renouncing the material world were emphasized. This movement was in direct opposition to the classical view of the rational mind. Influenced very much by Platonic thought, the goal for the Gnostic was to shed the encumbrance of matter and achieve the freedom of an unencumbered soul—ultimately becoming united with the fullness of God. Gnostic writings focus on hidden, divine secrets that open the door to this unity with God. Gnostic groups kept these writings to themselves, not wanting to pollute their secret knowledge and practices with worldly influences.

The earliest Gnostic Gospel is the Gospel of Thomas, probably written around 150 A.D. The recently publicized Gnostic Gospel, the Gospel of Judas, was written around the same time. The other writings (e.g. The Gospel of Philip, The Gospel of Mary, The Gospel of Truth, The Gospel of the Hebrews) were written in the 200's and 300's A.D. All of these works claim to be written by people close to Jesus, but they were clearly recognized to be false claims because of the late date of their writing. These writings are neither Gospels (accounts of Jesus' life) nor were they written by the people who are named in their titles. They were simply tools to perpetuate the Gnostic belief system. Other factors that took these writings off the radar as authentic works were their rejection of the Hebrew Old Testament and their wild, mythical claims about Jesus. Commenting on how the Gnostic Gospels exaggerated the divine nature of Jesus, John Ortberg said,

"In fact, part of the irony of this is that it's the later non-eyewitness Gnostic accounts of Jesus' life that have the wildest stories in them and that make Jesus look the least human. For instance in one of them Jesus, as a little boy, is playing with clay. He makes some pigeons and says some magical words, and the pigeons turn into real birds and fly away. In another one of these Gnostic accounts, Jesus is a little kid when he gets into a fight with another little kid. Jesus is mad at him so he curses the other boy and he dies. Jesus kills another little boy by the power of his magic curse. In another one of these stories, after the crucifixion, Jesus comes out of the tomb, but now he's real big—he's as big as Paul Bunyan. And after he comes out of the tomb, the cross comes out of the tomb, and the cross speaks. It's a talking cross!"

It's like something out of a really bad Disney video! These are actual stories. They're not hard to find" (Jesus and The Da Vinci Code" December 7, 2003).

Ben Witherington III summed it up well in his article in "Christianity Today":

"The case was never that the Gnostic documents were excluded or deleted [from the Scriptural Canon]. Rather, they were never serious contenders for inclusion in the canon, either in the Eastern or Western church. As the canon list of Athanasius in 367 demonstrates, even in the home region of the Nag Hammadi texts (Gnostic writings found near Egypt) none of those texts was ever included in a canon. None ever appeared in any authoritative list, and it is perhaps also suggestive that when the Nag Hammadi texts were found, they were found without one single canonical book included with them. This should tell us something about how they were separated from and viewed differently from canonical books" ("Why the 'Lost' Gospels Lost Out," p.31).

Instead of puzzling through secret writings composed hundreds of years after Jesus ascension, we can examine early creeds in the Bible. The following verses are believed to be some of the oldest official statements of Christian belief. The language is creedal and the terminology reflects an accurate and authoritative verbal transmission.

- Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. What key doctrines of the Christian faith can you find in this section—written around 55 A.D., just over 20 years after Jesus' ascension?
- Read Ephesians 4:4-6. This is another early New Testament writing—probably written around 60 A.D. What key doctrines do you find in these verses?
- Read Philippians 2:6-11. Written around 61 A.D., this creed also has foundational doctrinal teachings. Identify as many as you can.

Just think, in the 30 years after Jesus ascended into heaven, several widespread, well-known creeds were already in circulation.

- What does this fact tell you about when the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith were formed?
- How does this impact your faith today?

The Dead Sea Scrolls?

Another controversy about the Bible focuses on the content of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some critics have asserted that these scrolls destroy the credibility of the Bible. What's the real story about the Dead Sea Scrolls?

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in caves near Qumran starting in 1947. The scrolls are comprised of thousands of fragments and hundreds of copies of Old Testament books of the Bible along with other non-Biblical documents. They show us what the Old Testament looked like from 250 B.C. to 70 A.D. These scrolls are, in some cases, 1000 years older than the previously known Old Testament manuscripts. The consistency of the scrolls is amazing! Dr. Nathan Jastram from Concordia University, Wisconsin commented on the key conclusion derived from the scrolls:

*"There is no other book in the world that has been copied so faithfully for such a long time as the Bible" ("The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Bible Jesus Could Have Used," *The Concordian*, Winter 2000, p.5).*

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain at least one copy of every Hebrew book of the Bible except Esther. They reinforce the tremendous excitement of remarkable accuracy in Biblical Studies. Far from being a threat to Biblical credibility, the scrolls are an amazing ally to Biblical scholars.

- Read Isaiah 9:2-7. This text is part of the Dead Sea Scrolls from the first cave at Qumran. Verses 3-13 were found on a fragment in cave number four. How does this ancient prophetic text contrast with the message of those who would assert the Scrolls as an enemy to faith in Jesus Christ?

The Q Document?

The “Q” document has also become a topic of conversation for Biblical critics. Some say that this mysterious document is another threat to the Scriptures.

The “Q” document is, in reality, an imagined document—not real at all. It’s the theory of Biblical critics who believe there may be a source document that supplied information for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. “Q” stands for the German word “quelle,” meaning “source.” Some scholars theorize that the Gospel of Mark might actually be Q.

What difference does all this make? It serves to show how scholars try to understand the Bible. Analyzing the Bible requires a faithful attitude to what the Bible actually is. As a very well documented piece of ancient literature, the Bible demands careful analysis and respect. As the Word of God, the Bible requires a faithful analysis—an understanding of the unique purpose of the Scriptures.

The study of Scriptural documents is called “Biblical Criticism.” This doesn’t mean that the Bible is “criticized.” It means that critics—people involved in literary analysis—examine the documents and texts. A faithful approach to Biblical analysis means that manuscript evidence is considered based on the age of the document, the location in which it was found, and how common the document was in a broad area. If there is a variant reading in a text, typically the most difficult one is accepted (a copyist would tend to simplify a text). Clues are examined to determine the date of writing. This can be done in a faithful way.

Unfaithful approaches to Biblical Criticism exist as well. This usually involves a presupposition by the critic that the Bible is not factual, that it isn’t an actual ancient work, and that the contents were made up by zealous writers who were trying to advance their own political agenda. An example of an approach like this is the infamous “Jesus Seminar.” Assuming that most of the Gospels are comprised of human fabrication, these scholars vote on what they think Jesus really said and what they think was made up by the writer. Very little material from the Gospels makes the cut.

- Read 2 Peter 3:1-3. How do Peter’s words apply to all this talk about biblical criticism, the Q document, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Gnostic Gospels?
- Discuss other contemporary examples of what Peter talks about.
- Read Ezekiel 34:1-16. What message from God does Ezekiel bring regarding the leaders of Israel?
- How does this message apply to authors, scholars, and leaders (like you!) of today?
- What hope do these verses give as you seek the truth of God’s Word?
- Talk about how these verses can fuel your conversation with others regarding the questions, accusations and religious myths that surface in today’s world.

Encouragement for Life and Ministry

Reflect on today’s study and encourage each other in your Christian walk and in your service to God and His people.

Intercession and Prayer

Close with a prayer that sums up your time together and that lifts up the needs of the group.

Evangelism

Remember that God calls you to reach out and may be leading you to invite someone to your group.

The Case for Christianity

Session 4 – Christianity Becomes an Official Religion

Fellowship

The host opens the meeting with prayer.

Briefly share with each other an update about what's been going on in your life. Share a "high" and a "low" from the past week or two.

Learning God's Ways

A Conniving King?

One line of attack on the Christian faith has as its focus an ancient Roman emperor. The Emperor Constantine, who ruled the Roman Empire from 306 to 337 A.D., is portrayed as a leader who manipulated the Bible and Christian beliefs in order to reinforce dominance in the world. Some have claimed that Constantine manipulated the person of Christ and the place of Christianity in the world in order to gain power and control. Constantine has been characterized as an underhanded pagan who was using a popular faith to help strengthen his power base. He is also accused of pushing an underhanded political maneuver by combining Christian holy days with pagan ritual days.

Not too many people stay current with Roman history, so the assertions about Constantine may lead some people to believe that Jesus' divinity and the fabric of the Christian church may merely amount to a political power play.

What's the truth? Once again, the assertions are fictional.

- Read Zechariah 4:6-9. These verses demonstrate how the power of God works in an ordinary person's life. Verse 6 articulates an important principle for our lives and for the way God builds His church. Discuss how this principle relates to Constantine and the building of the Christian Church.
- Discuss how it relates to your life.

A Concerned King

The real history of Constantine is quite different that some "scholars" may portray it to be. Constantine began his rule just after Diocletian's divided kingdom fell apart (a rule shared by two senior emperors and two junior emperors). Seven individuals struggled for power. Constantine was drawn into the equation as the other rulers grew more hostile toward his activity in the north. By 312 A.D. Maxentius was threatening Constantine's authority. Even though he was outnumbered, Constantine attacked Maxentius and won. Licinius was in control of the eastern part of the empire. He was a treacherous leader, so Constantine tried to conquer him, as well. After reaching a no-win situation in 314, the two leaders decided to rule their respective kingdoms as partners. This partnership lasted 10 years until Licinius began to show signs of rebellion. Constantine went to war with Licinius and was victorious once again. Constantine became sole ruler of the Roman Empire in 324.

Constantine worked to restore the unity and stability of the Roman Empire. His goal was to rediscover the Rome of old. He worked toward a stable rule, a healthy economy, a fair political climate, and an attitude of respect and honor to the varied citizenship of the empire.

As you will see in the next section, a major part of his work impacted the Christian Church.

- Read John 18:28-36. What do these verses make clear when it comes to the assertion that the Christian Church developed as an organization grasping after earthly political power?
- Talk about how you would define “the kingdom of God.”

A Converted King

Before Constantine marched against Maxentius, an amazing thing happened. While Constantine prayed to a pagan god for help in the battle, he saw a vision of a cross in the sky and heard a voice telling him that he would have victory if he fought under the sign of this cross. Constantine heeded his vision and even had many of his soldiers put the sign of the cross on their shields.

After this victory at the Milvian Bridge on the Tiber River, Constantine became much more supportive of Christianity. In fact, in 313 he and Licinius issued an edict of toleration for all religious groups. Christians were once again able to own property, and the Christian church became a legally recognized body.

Constantine cannot be called a staunch Christian. Throughout his life he seemed to waver between Christian and pagan practices. His life appears to be that of one seeking God. When he became sick before a battle in 337, Constantine was baptized. The Christian custom of the day was to be baptized as close to death as possible. This was thought to be effective in washing away as many sins as possible. Constantine’s baptism was not a deathbed conversion. It simply showed that his mustard seed faith had taken some root.

- Read Isaiah 44:24 - 45:6. These verses prophesy that God will raise up a king named Cyrus to bring the people of Israel back to Jerusalem. This prophecy took place more than 100 years before Cyrus came to power. What do these verses tell you about how God works to preserve His church?
- How do these verses relate to how God used Constantine?
- What do these verses tell you about how God works in your life?
- Read Revelation 19:11-16. Discuss how this vision of Jesus relates to the real story behind Constantine’s actions—along with the challenges of your life.

A Conduit King

History does not show that Constantine’s attraction to Christianity, the freedoms he granted, or the involvement he had in the council of Nicaea, were manipulative power plays. It appears that Constantine was trying to move the Roman Empire forward in an effective way, while at the same time being attracted to the Gospel message of life in Jesus Christ. Constantine appears to be a sincere man, trying to serve citizens with strength and fairness. He also seems to be more reactive than proactive. His battles were responses to tyrannical threats, not actions fueled by a power-hungry spirit.

Constantine appears to be a conduit of God’s action in history. God raised up this emperor to accomplish purposes that were much bigger than any Roman Emperor could imagine. Believers were praying for relief as Christian persecution ran rampant in the 200’s. God responded with His grace and mercy. In the process, the Christian faith flourished, the church grew, heresies were dealt with, and a foundation for the future was laid on the solid rock of the Scriptures.

- Read Matthew 16:13-18. Jesus promised to build the church on the confession that Peter spoke. How did God use history to make sure this happened (think of Constantine's time and other historical events)?
- Think of your personal history. Discuss how you came to know Christ and how God used *your* history (people, events, etc.) to lead you to Him.

Encouragement for Life and Ministry

Reflect on today's study and encourage each other in your Christian walk and in your service to God and His people.

Intercession and Prayer

Close with a prayer that sums up your time together and that lifts up the needs of the group.

Evangelism

Remember that God calls you to reach out and may be leading you to invite someone to your group.

The Case for Christianity

Session 5 – The Council of Nicaea

Fellowship

The host opens the meeting with prayer.

Briefly share with each other an update about what's been going on in your life. Share a "high" and a "low" from the past week or two.

Learning God's Ways

What is a Church Council?

As people debate the origins of the Christian faith, one focal point is the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. Some assert that until the council was held, people only knew Jesus as a mortal prophet, a good man who was not God. The Council, according to some critics, was called by Constantine in order to upgrade Jesus' status to Divine. In order to support this new identity of Jesus, the council put together a Bible that validated Jesus' "new" status. All of this was done because Emperor Constantine wanted to keep his control of the church. At least that's what the critics want to believe.

It's an interesting story, but it's not true.

- Read Acts 15:1-21. This reading tells about the very first church council. Discuss what the dispute was, how the conflict was handled, what the decision was based on, and what action took place after the issue was settled.
- What does this section of Scripture tell you about church councils?
- What do these verses tell you about how you are called to settle conflicts?

Why was the Council of Nicaea called?

To be completely honest, this may not be a burning question in your life. Questions and controversies may be motivating you to find out more about the Council of Nicaea, but beyond that you may not be interested in it much at all.

This is precisely where God may be using religious controversy to bring important, but often ignored, teaching to His people. The Council of Nicaea is a defining moment in the history of the church. After the persecution of the 200's settled down, a philosophical view of God began to take hold. Reason started to usurp a position of authority over God's Word. Arius was a good example. Using a philosophical approach to God, Arius reasoned that because God was one in essence, there could be no other being with that essence. Jesus, Arius reasoned, would have to be a secondary, created being. Arius' conclusion was that there was a time when Jesus did not exist.

This assertion caused a crisis in the church. It was against clear Biblical teaching. It made Jesus part of creation, yet still One to be worshipped. It caused doubt and confusion about the teaching of salvation through Jesus Christ because Christ would no longer be the substitute for our rescue from sin and death.

Arius' claims were also dividing the Roman Empire. Christianity was widespread and the repercussions of a divided church brought weakness to a united kingdom. After Arius was excommunicated by his

bishop in 320 A.D., the conflict intensified. Personal allegiance now came into the picture. Something had to be done. That's when Constantine stepped in. First he sent his personal bishop to serve as a mediator. Unfortunately, that failed. That's when Constantine called the Bishops from all over the empire to attend a general council that would be held in northwestern Turkey in the year 325—in the city of Nicaea.

The points of view were presented and the group re-affirmed the Biblical teaching that Jesus is “very God of very God,” “one substance” with the Father, “begotten, not made.” More than three hundred delegates voted on this re-affirmation of the Biblical faith. Only two ended up not signing what would become “The Nicene Creed.” (See the end of this lesson for a full text of the creed)

- Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. Reason is a wonderful tool from God. God wants us to think, evaluate, and discern. Talk about what these verses say, however, about the place of reason in our understanding of God's person and plan.

Were there other Councils?

Nicaea was actually the third council that Constantine called. He gathered bishops together in Rome in 313 and in Arles in 314 to settle a doctrinal dispute. While bishops and church leaders had organized special gatherings for years to discuss questions and issues, Constantine gave the decisions of councils binding force. He also made it easy for church representatives to travel by organizing the time and place, along with paying travel expenses.

Other councils, called ecumenical councils, followed Constantine's rule. The councils of Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), are regarded by the whole Christian church as binding ecumenical councils.

- Read 2 Timothy 2:15. The word for “correctly handles” is connected with our word “orthodox.” It means “straight teaching.” What is Paul asking Timothy to do in this verse?
- After discussing church councils, what is your impression of how these gatherings handled the word of truth?
- What personal lessons about handling God's Word have you learned from these councils?

What is “heresy” all about?

Councils identified and gave Biblical input about heresies. In our day of relativism and claims that there is no absolute truth, the word “heretic” may not be very politically correct. But this word, rooted in the Greek language, has a long history.

The word “heretic” is from a Greek word that means “to choose” or “to decide.” It developed into a word that referred to someone's choice to be in a sect or other group. During New Testament times and throughout the history of the church this word was used for people who denied Jesus and who taught false doctrine.

- Read 2 Peter 2:1-3. This first century warning about heretics shows that false teaching was nothing new in the church. Discuss what false teaching exists today.

The word “heretic” was used to address many false teachers in the 1st, 2nd, 3rd centuries and more. It was used for the Gnostics in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, but it was not a new term invented to persecute those who opposed the political flow of Constantine’s reign.

- Read Titus 3:10-11. The word for “divisive” (NIV) in this reading is “heretic.” Discuss why Paul is giving this advice to Titus.
- After reading these verses and the verses above, try to describe the nature of heresy.
- What approach should a Christian take to a heretic?

The Nicene Creed:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And the third day he rose again according to the scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. And he will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church, I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Encouragement for Life and Ministry

Reflect on today’s study and encourage each other in your Christian walk and in your service to God and His people.

Intercession and Prayer

Close with a prayer that sums up your time together and that lifts up the needs of the group.

Evangelism

Remember that God calls you to reach out and may be leading you to invite someone to your group.

The Case for Christianity

Session 6 – Mary Magdalene

Fellowship

The host opens the meeting with prayer.

Briefly share with each other an update about what's been going on in your life. Share a "high" and a "low" from the past week or two.

Learning God's Ways

A Mysterious Mary?

In an amazing turn of events, Mary Magdalene has become the center of attention in religious debates and controversies. Some have claimed that Mary Magdalene was Jesus' wife and had a child with him (you'll remember this assertion from the book, The Da Vinci Code). Others have made Mary a figure in history who opposed the teachings and ways of the early Christian Church.

What is so important about these wild tales? Why should you care about a relatively obscure woman in the history of the church?

These assertions about Mary Magdalene distract from Mary's key purpose in the Bible. God used Mary Magdalene to bring an important message to His people. If Mary's life is corrupted, her message may be lost!

- Read Mark 15:40. What is the context of this verse?
- What did Mary Magdalene witness and how do you think this impacted her life?
- Read Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:9, and John 20:18. Discuss the content of these verses and what additional information they give you about Mary Magdalene.
- What do you think Mary Magdalene's key purpose in the Bible is?

Mary Magdalene is mentioned 12 times in the Gospels. What you read above provides the essential elements of her life. As you see, there is one very important focus in life for Mary Magdalene. It is a focus that continues to bring life to the world!

A Married Mary?

What about the story of Mary Magdalene's marriage to Jesus? Is it true? If we say it's not, is there any way to prove that? What about the Gnostic Gospel statements that point to a close relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene?

In addition to the fact that the Gnostic documents are unreliable, the Bible makes the relationship of Jesus and Mary Magdalene crystal clear—all with one word.

- Read John 20:10-18. What elements of these verses give you information about the relationship of Mary and Jesus?
- How would you characterize this relationship?

Some of you may have leaned toward a close relationship because of verse 17. Mary seems to be embracing Jesus. Some have used this verse to reinforce the Gnostic gospel references that indicate the possibility of a romantic relationship between Jesus and Mary.

Verse 16, however, tells the real story about Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The word “Rabboni,” as the text explains, is an Aramaic word that means “teacher.” Why did John emphasize this word? To emphasize the relationship that Mary had with Jesus! “Rabboni” means “my teacher.” It also carries with it a meaning of reverence from a younger student to an older teacher. In addition to that, the title carries with it a sense of having God’s authority. Mary was calling Jesus “Master teacher,” “blessed teacher,” “teacher who has God’s authority.”

Mary was a young student standing before her teacher. She was also a faithful believer standing before her Savior God. The word “Rabboni” makes that clear.

That relationship of Mary to Jesus is further reinforced by what Mary said in verse 18. Just as she did not greet Jesus by name (nor did she call him “darling” or “lover”), she did not tell the disciples that she had seen “Jesus” or her “dear friend” or her “lover.” She said, “I have seen the Lord.” The word “Lord” makes Jesus equivalent with “Yahweh,” the identity of the true God revealed in the Scriptures (Old Testament at the time). Mary acknowledged Jesus as Lord and God! This was definitely not a marriage relationship.

Some critics may make wild claims about Mary, but the Bible makes the facts very clear. Mary was restored by Jesus. She was a faithful disciple. She witnessed the two most critical events in the life of Jesus—His crucifixion and his resurrection. As a believer in Him, she became a bold witness to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Romance was not the focus of Mary’s life with Jesus. It was all about the Gospel!

- Discuss the information given above and the Bible passages you’ve read about Mary Magdalene. In your opinion, how does the Bible portray Mary Magdalene?
- Why would the devil want Mary Magdalene’s real purpose and personality to be confused? Talk about what is at stake.

A Mum Mary?

Theories about Mary and about other anti-Biblical claims (remember the “Jesus Ossuary”) are frequently reinforced by the “argument of silence.” One television commentator said that if there is no evidence throughout history and if no one ever said anything about Jesus’ marriage, the “silence is pregnant” with possibilities.

This line of reasoning may be good for a fiction novel and for conspiracy-theory based television specials, but it is not how God works with His people.

God is not silent at all about His intentions or His actions. He is a God of revelation—revealing the light of His saving work in a dark world.

- Discuss what the following verses say about how God reveals Himself clearly. Compare the content of these verses to the claims of an “argument of silence.”
 - Deuteronomy 30:11-14
 - Psalm 16:11
 - John 1:14-18
 - John 15:15
 - John 18:20

The cornerstone of the Christian faith is the revealed Word of God—His message of hope and life that we would have never known unless He took initiative to communicate this grace and truth to us. The apostle Peter said in 2 Peter 1:16, “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” After Peter describes his eyewitness experience, he says in verse 19, “And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as a light shining in a dark place...”

God doesn't leave us with silence and speculation. He lets us know all that we need. Whether it's about Mary Magdalene or our life and salvation, God gives us the certain Word, not silence!

Encouragement for Life and Ministry

Reflect on today's study and encourage each other in your Christian walk and in your service to God and His people.

Intercession and Prayer

Close with a prayer that sums up your time together and that lifts up the needs of the group.

Evangelism

Remember that God calls you to reach out and may be leading you to invite someone to your group.

The Case for Christianity

Session 7 – Jesus

Fellowship

The host opens the meeting with prayer.

Briefly share with each other an update about what’s been going on in your life. Share a “high” and a “low” from the past week or two.

Learning God’s Ways

The Rumor

Jesus Christ is one of the most talked about and controversial figures in history. Some call Jesus a mortal prophet. Some say that Jesus’ goal was to create an earthly rule with His followers taking command of society. Some say that the Biblical accounts of Jesus are “stories” designed to help people cope.

These statements join an array of human speculation about Jesus. Jesus even asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13; Mark 8:27). The disciples responded with the speculation of the people. Perhaps He was a John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or another prophet. These days, the conversation continues. Perhaps Jesus was a good teacher, or a good man, or the leader of a rebellion, or a fake. There are all kinds of ideas.

What is at stake in this speculation? Is it just innocent musing or are there bigger issues? Notice that Jesus asked in Matthew 16:15 and Mark 8:29, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Jesus showed that His identity is of utmost importance—not just in the area of general speculation, but for your life! Being crystal clear about the person of Christ is the bedrock of your eternity.

- Read Matthew 16:18. How did Jesus highlight the importance of knowing who He is?
- What did Jesus mean when He said, “And the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”?

Take a look at the following verses and discuss what is at stake when it comes to knowing the person and purpose of Jesus:

- 1 Corinthians 15:13-19
- Romans 5:6-10

The Reality

C.S. Lewis commented on people’s speculation about Jesus in his book Mere Christianity:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with

any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to” (56).

- Discuss whether or not you think C.S. Lewis’ quote makes sense in about who Jesus is.
- Read the verses below and jot down a “personality profile” about who Jesus is according to the Bible:
 - Matthew 27:54
 - Luke 1:35
 - Luke 4:41
 - John 10:30
 - Romans 1:1-4
 - Colossians 1:13-20

The evidence of Jesus as true God is overwhelming. The Bible makes the person of Christ very clear: 100% human—just like us, so that He could be the perfect substitute for us. He was born, lived, and died in our place. He was also 100% God, so that He could fulfill perfectly what we are unable to fulfill. He paid the debt of our sin and reconciled us to God. He rose from the dead as final evidence and a powerful declaration of His true nature, the Son of God. Our lives depend on who Jesus is. 1 John 5:5 says, “Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.” As we encounter the miraculous Son of God, we say with the man in Mark 9:24, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

The Reason

A primary struggle during Jesus’ life was the misguided hope of many people that He would be an earthly king. There are people today who perpetuate this perception that Jesus was on earth to establish a temporal rule.

But that premise is all wrong. Jesus was here for a completely different purpose—a purpose that, in our own pride and ambition, we miss. But it is a purpose that we desperately need.

- Read the following verses and discuss the primary purpose of Jesus’ life on earth:
 - Matthew 20:28
 - Luke 19:10
 - John 6:38-40

This mission of Jesus didn’t make sense to the people during Jesus’ day. It doesn’t make sense in our age of power, control, and success either. St. Paul captured the truth of how we have a difficult time figuring out and accepting God’s ways. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 the Apostle Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. He makes it clear that human wisdom becomes foolishness when measured against God’s ways and plans.

- Read the following verses and discuss how Jesus made His purpose very clear—even though people had a difficult time listening and understanding:
 - Matthew 16:21-23
 - Matthew 26:50-56
 - John 6:13-15
 - John 18:36
- Discuss how the difficulty in understanding Jesus shows itself today.

Clearly, Jesus' purpose here was not about power. It was all about His passion to save us!

The RSVP

As you read these verses and discuss who Jesus is, the goal is not merely to gain knowledge. The goal is for your life to be transformed and saved. The Apostle John made that clear when he summarized the purpose of his gospel: *"These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name"* (John 20:31).

Whenever a person encounters Jesus, he or she is posed with the question Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do YOU say that I am?" That's the most important point about Jesus that critics overlook.

What is your response to the reality of Jesus? What "RSVP" will you give Him?

He simply desires that, first, you admit you need help. You recognize that you can't do life on your own. You need a Savior.

Second, God calls you to recognize that Jesus is the helper you need. He took your helplessness and sin upon Himself when He died on the cross. He rose from the dead to make sure that nothing separates you from God's love.

Third, the Holy Spirit calls you to trust Jesus with your life. In addition to the knowledge you have *about* Him, you are also called to commit to a relationship *with* Him.

You may be a veteran believer or you may be getting to know Jesus for the first time. But you can pray the following prayer as a recommitment or a first time commitment to your Savior:

"God, I recognize the truth about my life. I need help. I can't do life on my own. Thank you for telling me the truth about my capabilities and about my needs. Today I ask that you help me. Be my Savior. I will trust in you. I believe that you sent Jesus to die for me, to bear my burdens, and to give me new life. I want that new life. Please give me this gift. I give my life to you."

- Read Matthew 11:28 and John 3:16-17. Discuss what promises God gives through Jesus.

Encouragement for Life and Ministry

Reflect on today's study and encourage each other in your Christian walk and in your service to God and His people.

Intercession and Prayer

Close with a prayer that sums up your time together and that lifts up the needs of the group.

Evangelism

Remember that God calls you to reach out and may be leading you to invite someone to your group.

The Case for Christianity

Session 8 – Reaching out

Fellowship

The host opens the meeting with prayer.

Briefly share with each other an update about what's been going on in your life. Share a "high" and a "low" from the past week or two.

Learning God's Ways

Opportunity

After spending your time discussing the debates, doubts, and questions about Christianity, you may feel discouraged about how many people are being reached with false and confusing information. Perhaps you're angry that so many untruths are making their way around the world in print, on television, and in film.

God gives us a different perspective, however. Take a look at what St. Paul said about the way we fight this battle:

- Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. What new perspective do these verses give you when it comes to dealing with Da Vinci deception?

Think about the phrase "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." God gives us the opportunity to use things of the world to open doors for the things of God. Think about it: when people start to talk about the latest fads of belief, they are bringing up subjects that can impact them for eternity! If you use the opportunity wisely, you will be able to talk about Jesus, God's Word of life, the purpose of the church, and more!

- Read Ephesians 5:15-16 and Colossians 4:5-6. Discuss the opportunities religious questions and debates might offer, and other opportunities for talking about Jesus that life may bring.
- What do the verses above say to do with these opportunities?

Conversation

Now comes the difficult part. God calls you to speak up. How do you do that? How do you talk about your faith? Once the opportunity opens up, what do you say?

- Read 1 Peter 3:15. What clues does this verse give about the preparation for, and content of, your dialog with others about your faith in Jesus?
- Share in a simple and understandable way why Jesus gives you hope.
- Read Philemon 1:6. What does this verse say about a result of sharing your faith?

The practice of defending your faith brings many opportunities for meaningful conversation about life in Jesus.

- Discuss how the “talking points” below can direct your conversation to the reason for your hope in Christ.
 - This “new” information is so popular!
 - Does the Bible really claim that Jesus was God?
 - Those Gnostic Gospels sound very interesting!
 - I didn’t know that the Bible is just the product of human beings in history.
 - Did the Council of Nicaea really make up Jesus’ divinity?
 - I like to ask questions and dig into controversy. I wonder why it is so upsetting to the church.

Direction

As you discussed the points above, it is important to remember that your goal is not to argue about details of whatever controversy, discovery, or fad that happens to have appeared on the scene. Your goal is to proclaim God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. For each point above you can bring the conversation around to another set of questions:

- “Who do you believe Jesus to be for your life?”
- “What message does the Bible give you?”
- “What do you think the focus of the Christian Church is?”

You can ask questions about personal faith—an amazing open door of new life for so many!

When it comes to the details, however, you may get stumped. That’s why resources are available for your use.

First, you can talk to your pastor or read helpful books like [The Case for Christ](#), [The Case for Faith](#), and [The Case for Easter](#) by Lee Strobel.

Second, you can check out helpful websites like www.equip.org (the home of the Bible Answer Man) or The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod website (www.lcms.org). There are many good resources to help you give a powerful witness to the hope you have in Jesus.

Jesus makes you some great promises when it comes to your witness in the world.

- Read Matthew 10:17-20. This was Jesus’ promise to His followers as He predicted the persecution that would come. How do these verses apply to you as you are put in the position of speaking up for Christ?
- Read John 14:26-27. Talk about how Jesus’ words in these verses affect you as you are put in the position of sharing the life that Jesus gives.
- Read Matthew 5:13-19. As you come to the end of this study, talk about why God has you on this earth during a time when books, television shows, rumors, and religious controversies like rage.

Encouragement for Life and Ministry

Reflect on today’s study and encourage each other in your Christian walk and in your service to God and His people.

Intercession and Prayer

Close with a prayer that sums up your time together and that lifts up the needs of the group.

Evangelism

Remember that God calls you to reach out and may be leading you to invite someone to your group. Talk about what you're going to study next and be ready to invite a new person to participate!