

Discussion Guide for Reading Groups

The
PRESCRIPTION
Against Heretics

Tertullian

Resurrection Publishing

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THE PRESCRIPTION AGAINST HERETICS

TERTULLIAN

One Patristic (West) voice on Scripture and unity

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The Prescription Against Heretics — Discussion Guide
Tertullian

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This voice among four

How does Scripture hold the Church in one faith against division and heresy? Christians have answered that question with shared seriousness and with real differences in emphasis. This guide begins with Tertullian because it is made to help a group read *The Prescription Against Heretics* carefully, together, and all the way through.

Tertullian · one Patristic (West) voice on that question.

Tertullian is one of four voices gathered around this question. Jewel's *Apology of the Church of England*, Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, and Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures* belong in conversation: they share a concern for receiving the one faith, yet they do not flatten their traditions into one answer. Let their kinship be a help, and their honest difference an occasion for patient attention.

This guide is for Tertullian's treatise. For a reading group, the Tertullian hardcover is available in a facilitator pack of 8, so each reader may have the work in hand.

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Facilitator norms

This is a conversation that may touch sensitive ground, but it need not become a place where anyone is pressed to disclose what they have not chosen to share. Invite candor; do not require it. A participant may speak from the text, from prayer, or from a question still taking shape. Silence is not failure, and no one is asked to prove seriousness by telling more than is wise.

Read the author with care before judging him quickly. Let people finish a thought. Ask what a passage says before asking how it applies. Where the group disagrees, name the disagreement plainly and return to the words on the page. The aim is neither to win an argument nor to make a display of self-knowledge, but to hear a Christian teacher faithfully and to seek the Lord together.

Keep Christ at the center. The counsel in these pages is not a set of religious techniques by which we repair ourselves. Faith looks to Christ, depends upon his Spirit, and receives the ordinary means of grace with humility. Pray at the beginning and end; make room for repentance and hope; leave one another with encouragement that is truthful, particular, and free of pressure.

Tertullian — argument map

Tertullian begins with the fact of heresy and ends with the discipline that guards truth. The map below traces the argument as a whole; the eight sessions read the treatise straight through, chapter by chapter, in the order Tertullian wrote it.

1. The fact of heresy (Ch. I). Heresies were foretold; their existence is not a scandal to the faith but a test that approves it. They do not catch the Church off guard.

2. The gate (Ch. XV). Heretics may not appeal to Scripture at all, because the question of who rightly possesses Scripture must be settled first. The churches hold the Scriptures; heretics have no title to them.

3. The Rule of Faith (Ch. XIII). The deposit has a summary — the Rule of Faith, the creed's substance: one God, His Son, the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of the flesh. This fixed rule is the measure by which doctrine is judged.

4. The apostolic deposit (Ch. XX–XXI). Christ sent the apostles; the apostles founded churches and delivered the one faith to them. Doctrine that agrees with the apostolic churches is truth; doctrine that departs is falsehood. The churches are the offspring of the apostles.

5. The heir of the apostles (Ch. XXXVII). The Church is the heir of the apostles, holding sure title-deeds to the truth. Heretics are outsiders, disinherited by their own divergence. Truth has prescription against error.

6. The discipline that guards truth (Ch. XLIV). The Church's stricter discipline is evidence of truth. The faith is a virgin committed to the Church; heresy is its adultery. To keep the Rule is to be mindful of the judgment.

Session 1

Reading: Chapters I–VII

Where we are: Tertullian opens with the fact of heresy — foretold, permitted, and serving to approve the faith — and then shows that heresy is a choice, a self-condemned departure that borrows its ideas from pagan philosophy rather than from Scripture.

Understand: Why does Tertullian say heresies ought not to occasion wonder, and what does he mean that they exist for the purpose of giving faith, through trial, an opportunity to be approved?

Discern: Tertullian calls heresy a matter of choice (*hairesis*), and says heretics are self-condemned. How does naming heresy a choice — rather than an honest mistake — change how a believer faces division in the Church today?

Trust: Where does this opening chapter direct a person who has been troubled by the mere existence of so many conflicting teachings?

Tip: Let the group sit with the strangeness of Tertullian's claim — that heresy is not the Church's failure but the occasion of her testing — before moving to application.

Session 2

Reading: Chapters VIII–XIV

Where we are: Tertullian takes up the heretics’ favorite text — “Seek and ye shall find” — and shows that the seeking belongs within the Church’s received faith, not to endless disputation. He then names the measure of that faith: the Rule, which admits no questionings.

Understand: Why does Tertullian say the “Seek and ye shall find” of the Gospel was spoken to those within the Church, and how does he rule that seeking must be bounded by what has been delivered?

Discern: How does this distinguish a faithful seeking after deeper understanding from a restless search that treats the faith as unsettled until each one decides it afresh?

Trust: Where does this chapter direct a person who wants to seek the truth but has been told that seeking means never being able to say “I have received” with confidence?

Tip: Spend time on the actual Rule Tertullian quotes in Ch. XIII — one God, His Son, the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of the flesh. It is a confession to pray as well as to analyze. Let the group feel the weight of this session before moving on.

Session 3

Reading: Chapters XV–XIX

Where we are: Tertullian reaches his main point: heretics are not to be admitted to any discussion of Scripture at all, because the question of who rightly possesses Scripture must be settled first.

Understand: What is Tertullian’s “prescription” (*praescriptio*), and why does he say the question of who has a right to the Scriptures must precede any debate about their meaning?

Discern: How is this different from refusing to listen to a sincere question — and how does Tertullian’s insistence on possession guard against Scripture being used to tear the Church apart?

Trust: Where does this chapter direct a person who has been drawn into endless argument about texts, when what they most need is to know where the faith is held whole?

Tip: Tertullian is deliberately blunt. Let the group feel the sharpness before softening it — the point is possession, not politeness.

Session 4

Reading: Chapters XX–XXVI

Where we are: Tertullian grounds his case: Christ sent the apostles, the apostles founded churches and delivered the one faith, and that deposit is carried by the apostolic churches.

Understand: How does Tertullian show that the apostolic churches are “the offspring of Apostolic Churches,” and what does he say a doctrine must agree with to be reckoned truth?

Discern: What does it mean that the churches are “in one Unity” through “the one tradition of the selfsame Bond of Faith” — and why is that unity evidence of truth rather than mere organization?

Trust: Where does this chapter direct a person who wants to know the truth but does not know which voices to trust?

Tip: Let the group trace the chain Tertullian draws — Christ, the apostles, the churches — and ask where they themselves stand in that line of reception. Give this session room; it carries the weight of the whole argument.

Session 5

Reading: Chapters XXVII–XXXIII

Where we are: Tertullian answers the objection that the churches themselves have erred: the churches that were reprovved were corrected, not left in error, and the one faith held everywhere is evidence of a common tradition, not of a common mistake. Truth is prior to falsehood, and the apostolic churches can show their succession.

Understand: Why does Tertullian say the reprovved churches were corrected rather than left in error, and how does the uniform faith of the churches prove a common tradition rather than a common mistake?

Discern: What does it mean that truth is prior to falsehood — that what was first delivered is from the Lord, and what was introduced later is strange? How does that order help a group tell what is received from the apostles from what is chosen by private opinion?

Trust: Where does this chapter direct a person who has been told that the Church's teaching has changed so often that nothing can be held with confidence?

Tip: Tertullian's test is succession: can a church show it was founded by an apostle and has kept the faith delivered? Let the group weigh that test against the claim that truth is simply whatever is newest.

Session 6

Reading: Chapters XXXIV–XXXIX

Where we are: Tertullian applies the gate to the named heretics of his day — Marcion, Valentinus, Apelles, and the rest — showing that their later date proves them corrupt, and that the Church, as heir of the apostles, holds the title-deeds to the Scriptures.

Understand: Why does Tertullian say the later date of the heresies proves them false, and what does he mean that the Church is the heir of the apostles holding sure title-deeds to the truth?

Discern: How does the Church’s claim to the Scriptures as heir differ from a heretic’s claim to interpret them? What does it mean that heretics have no right to the Christian Scriptures at all?

Trust: Where does this chapter direct a person who has been impressed by a persuasive teacher whose teaching, on closer look, does not hold the received faith?

Tip: Tertullian names names. Let the group move from the ancient heretics to the test itself: does the teaching agree with what the apostolic churches have always held?

Session 7

Reading: Chapters XL–XLIII

Where we are: Tertullian turns from doctrine to the manner of life of the heretics — their undisciplined assemblies, their unstable catechumens, their wandering teachers — as further evidence of departure.

Understand: Why does Tertullian treat the discipline and order of the churches as evidence of truth, and what does he observe about the disorder of heretical assemblies?

Discern: How does a community's discipline — its teaching order, its care for catechumens, its settled ministry — witness to whether it holds the faith it claims to hold?

Trust: Where does this chapter direct a person who has valued the energy of a group more than the order and steadiness of the Church's ordinary life?

Tip: Tertullian's point is not mere tidiness; it is that the Church's discipline guards the deposit. Let the group consider what habits and order protect the faith they receive.

Session 8

Reading: Chapters XLIV–XLV

Where we are: Tertullian closes with the Church’s stricter discipline as evidence of truth, and with the faith as a virgin committed to the Church — guarded by the Rule, mindful of the judgment — before his brief farewell.

Understand: What does Tertullian mean that the proofs of stricter discipline are “an additional evidence of truth,” and what is the faith that is called a “virgin committed to the Church”?

Discern: How does keeping the Rule of Faith guard a believer from the “adultery of heresy,” and why does Tertullian say those who wander fail to guard against those dangers whereby the true faith is imperiled?

Trust: Where does this whole treatise direct a person who wants to know the truth — not by private argument, but by receiving the apostolic deposit held in the churches?

Tip: Let the group end where Tertullian ends: before the judgment, holding the one faith received from the apostles. This is the point of the whole prescription.

Also on this question

If another voice would serve the group's next conversation, these editions take up the same question from different places in the tradition.

An Apology of the Church of England — John Jewel

Protestant

Jewel answers the charge of novelty with a claim of return: the true faith is tested by Scripture and antiquity, and reform is not invention but recovery. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine — John Henry Newman

Catholic

Newman asks how doctrine can be the same and yet develop across time, and he offers the seven notes by which true development is told from corruption. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

The Catechetical Lectures — Cyril of Jerusalem

Orthodox

Cyril hands on the one faith in catechesis — the creed received, learned, and sealed in baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist. Discussion guide · Hardcover and facilitator pack on the title page.

Letters from Resurrection Publishing

If this question is yours, Resurrection Publishing sends personal notes from Harvey, our founder — on reading these voices for real groups.

Sign up for the letters: <https://resurrectionpublishing.com/l/g>

Close

Thank you for giving this sharp little book the time it asks of you. Keep Tertullian near enough to return to: not as a substitute for Scripture, prayer, or the Church's ordinary life, but as a serious companion in learning that the faith is received, not invented — held whole by the apostolic churches, guarded by the Rule.

If this question remains with your group, the other voices on it are in the Resurrection Publishing catalog as hardcovers and ebooks, each with its own free discussion guide. They are invitations for another season of reading, not requirements for completing this one.

This edition is for readers who want the work itself, not a summary.