

Foundations for Ministry

Unit Two:

Jesus and His Story

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Unit 2: Jesus and His Story

Aims of this Unit:

- To explore links between the Old and New Testaments
- To introduce you to the story of Jesus in the New Testament as a fundamental part of the Christian tradition of faith and response;
- To explore approaches to the New Testament which enable Christians to receive its message for their own discipleship;

Contents

In Unit 2 of *Foundations for Ministry*, we shall be looking at the New Testament, the part of the Bible that is a direct and conscious response to the life and ministry of Jesus. We shall try to discover how people who knew him during his earthly life explained his impact on them, and how that explanation was influenced by their astounding discovery that he had risen from death. Our aim, as in Unit 1, on the story of God's people in the Old Testament, is to understand something of their message to men and women of faith today.

It is both a help and a hindrance that the Church has been doing exactly this for nearly 2000 years. It's a help, because we have all those years of Christian study, reflection and teaching to guide us in our own encounter with the story of Jesus in the New Testament. But it's a hindrance too, because all this accumulated wisdom can make it very hard for us to hear the text speaking with freshness and challenge.

Unit 2 has nine sessions, intended to be followed on a weekly basis – though your group may prefer to meet fortnightly, or to extend their study of one or more sessions into a second meeting. But the sessions should be tackled in the order given, and the next session only started when the previous one is completed.

Session 1	Old and New
Session 2	Jesus' story: setting the Scene
Session 3	Paul: The Man and his Message
Session 4	A Tale of Two Churches
Session 5	Mark's Good News
Session 6	Luke's Two-Part Story
Session 7	The Same View?
Session 8	According to John
Session 9	Revelation and Reflection

Not all the questions in each session have to be covered. You may select aspects that are of particular interest to your group, or especially relevant to your parish history. The questions are designed as a springboard for your thinking and group discussions, not as a straitjacket.

Further Reading for Unit 2

The following books are suggested as a background to Unit 2:

1. John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, Lion.

Illustrated with photos, maps and charts, this book offers an informative introduction to the New Testament writings. It's an easy-to-read reference book, rather than something to read from cover to cover – and is suitable for Christians who want to learn more as well as for students.

2. Gerd Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean*, SCM Press.

An interwoven tale of fact and fiction, written by a top biblical scholar in lively and readable form. It tells Jesus' story from the point of view of Andreas, a fictional contemporary of Jesus'. An easy way of learning a lot

3. Gerd Theissen, *The New Testament*, T and T Clark, 2003

Clear and non-technical introduction for the ordinary reader

4. E. Charpentier, *How to Read the New Testament*, SPCK, 1981.

The same workbook approach as the author's similar volume on the Old Testament. A lot of information in a small space. may

5. Simon Jones, *Discovering the New Testament*, IVP, 2001

A simple introduction from an evangelical standpoint

6. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, SCM.

A textbook which looks at the character of the earliest Christianity from historical, sociological and theological perspectives.

For general reference, you may also find the following helpful:

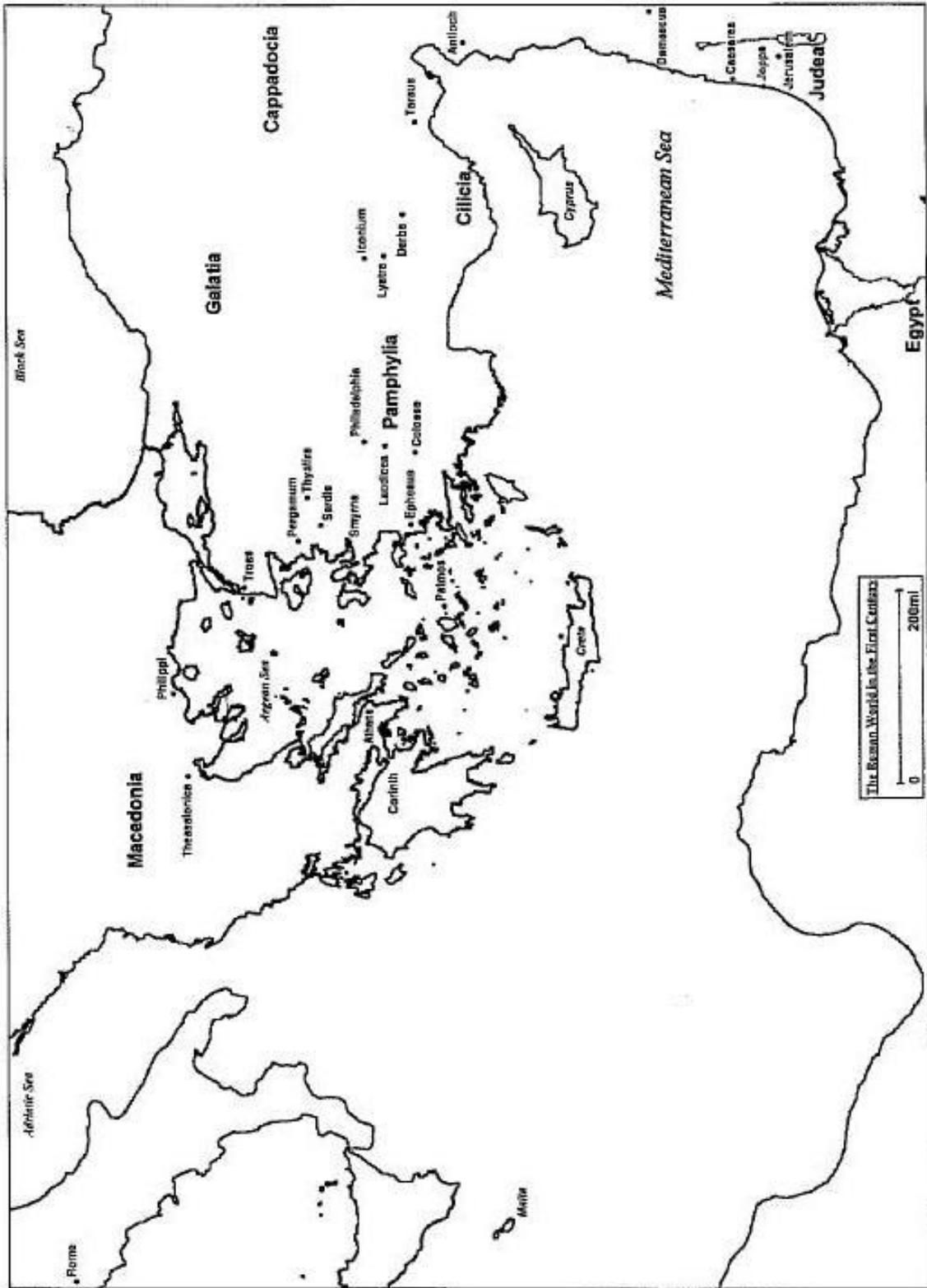
7. The New Lion Handbook to the Bible ed. D. Alexander Lion Hudson
3rd Ed 1999

Packed with information and colour pictures, it contains chapters by different experts on every book of the Bible.

8. C Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament*, Paternoster.

From time to time further reading on the subject of the session is suggested. This is not part of the main work, but solely for those who want to go deeper into the subject. It is often possible to borrow books from local or diocesan libraries, or from neighbouring clergy.

Map One: The Roman World in the 1st Century



Map Two: The Land of the Gospels



Session One

Old and New

Aims

- To look at some of the stories in the first chapters of Genesis;
- To see how these Old Testament stories are linked with the New Testament;
- To review our understanding of the Old Testament in the light of our work on Unit 1 of *Foundations for Ministry*.

Preparing for the Session

1. Read the following passages:
 - Genesis 1:26–30; 2:15–17; 3: 1–24
 - Genesis 4:1–11
 - Genesis 6:1–8; 7:1–23; 8:14–19; 9:8–17
 - Genesis 11:1–9
2. What do you think Genesis 1:27 might mean when it describes human beings as created ‘in the image of God’?
3. If you didn’t know the ending of the Adam and Eve story, what do you imagine might result from eating ‘the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’?
4. Read ‘Paradise Lost’:

Paradise Lost

It may seem odd to leave the very beginning of the Old Testament right until the end! But perhaps it is only when we appreciate the depths of spirituality and understanding of God possessed by the Israelites that we can see that these stories are not children’s tales, or bad science. They are intricate accounts of the origins of the world, trying to explain human relationships, the nature of God and the way societies work.

And by looking at these early stories at this stage we can make explicit links with the Gospel of Jesus and the new Covenant.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis have been called 'primeval history' – and together they form a structure of their own. They begin with God, who creates a universe which is ordered and good through a series of stages. At the start, everything is chaos – but the chaos is slowly transformed to become a cosmos of beauty, order and form. These first eleven chapters end with a different kind of chaos, this time caused by human beings: the chaos of the Flood, wiping out all but a few, and followed by another new start – and the chaos of Babel, where people's longing to be like God results in utter confusion and a breakdown in communication between people.

The first chapters of any book are important – they give the reader all kinds of information about what is to follow – about the setting, the characters, the whole framework in which the book is set. Genesis is no exception. These eleven chapters contain tales of the creation and of God's early relationships with humankind, perhaps written down to offer explanations of why the world was as it was – for example, why people spoke many different languages, why snakes crawled, why manual work was so unrewarding, why some people were settled farmers and others wandering nomads looking after their herds.

We learn some vital truths about God and his creation, which are retold, expressed differently, throughout Scripture – and which continue to affect what Christians believe about the world, and their relationship with their Creator. For example, we can come to recognise that creation didn't stop on 'Day 6' of the Genesis account, but that it is a continuing process. From the start of time until the present day, God's creative activities have continued to sustain the universe and world in which we live.

We learn too that human beings are at the heart of God's creation, that we are made in God's image. But what does that much-quoted phrase, 'in the image of God', actually mean? One understanding is that it is about relationships. For God, creator of all that has ever existed, is a God of relationship – and wants a loving and mutual relationship with his creation. God made human beings in his image, having the capacity to experience loving, inter-dependent relationships. And before the Fall, the relationships between God and human beings, between man and woman, between people and the natural world, were whole, harmonious and richly fulfilling. We learn, then, an extraordinary paradox: in our fallen world, the closer people grow to God, the more human they become too. Closeness to God doesn't mean otherworldly piety, a feet-off-the-ground sanctity; it means a richer, deeper joy of our humanity, our inter-relatedness with God, and God's world, a truer depiction of God's image in us.

These first chapters of Genesis also show us only too clearly the broken and dysfunctional relationships that spring from the refusal of human beings to live in the light of God's image within them. We read stories of guilt and punishment, broken relationships, ambition for power, the search for security, the powers of chaos that threaten the ordered world. We can see in these very first chapters of our Bible themes that will run on to Revelation – especially the key theme of broken relationships, and of God seeking to restore relationships with humanity through patriarchs, prophets, poets – and finally through taking human form in the person of Jesus Christ.

Note that these first chapters of Genesis contain no mention of Israel, God's chosen people, and most of them seem to imply a setting in Mesopotamia. They are very ancient stories from the period of oral tradition, which use motifs, or themes – creation, paradise, the Flood, the deliverance of humankind from total destruction – which are found in various forms in different cultures of the ancient Near East. What made these stories unique to the Jewish tradition was the role of Yahweh – and once again we pick up on the themes of God wanting an intimate relationship with his people, but conditional on their obedience to him – a set of conditions that they ignored at their peril.

So for the people who wrote them down, these ancient tales were a means of explaining how things had come to be the way they were. But for people in the last 200 years, they have raised at least as many questions as they have answered.

The Creation of the world

There are two stories of creation – the first between chap 1 vs 1 and ch 2 vs3 and the second in the remainder of chapter 2. You are probably fairly familiar with them. If so, remind yourself of the following verses, if not, read all of Chapters 1 and 2.

- Read Genesis 1 Ch.26-30, 2 Ch 15-17,
- What do these verses tell you about human beings? For example, what does being "made in the image of God" mean to you? What needs do human beings have?

Nb. The word 'helper', 'helpmeet', used to describe Eve Gen 2 18 and 20 is everywhere else in the Old Testament used to describe God! (e.g. Ps. 54, 4)

Did they fall – or were they pushed?

The story of Adam and Eve is one of the best-known in the Old Testament – and has caused more violent disagreements than most. Evolutionists, feminists, fundamentalists, and many others have used it to 'prove', 'disprove' or illustrate why they are right and others wrong. It remains a rich and profoundly fascinating story, which certainly raises many questions in the mind of today's readers – and which will repay a closer look as we near the end of this Old Testament study. Salvation history depends on it, for, as the medieval theologians were fond of saying, if Adam and Eve hadn't sinned, then Jesus would never have lived, died and risen again – and we would never have known the fullness of God's grace and love towards sinful men and women.

From the very start of our Bible, we are shown a God who is creative, who is tender, who longs for companionship with the people who are his creation – but also a God who gives people choices, and who creates rules, the wisdom of which aren't always obvious to his people.

But why? What is the point in God creating a glorious world, and also making the means by which it could all be spoiled? And what does 'the

tree of the knowledge of good and evil' mean? Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, by referring to other Old Testament uses of the phrase 'knowledge of good and evil', offers this suggestion:

The two words 'good' and 'evil' cover two extremes and everything in between; it is 'knowledge' of all possibilities that we are talking of here – that is, the potentiality that lies before Adam, if he will eat of the fruit – and it is from this knowledge that God wishes to preserve him.

(A Rabbi's Bible, p. 112)

For, God says, 'On the day you eat of it, you will surely die'. In other words, something about eating the fruit will change their awareness of the death that is ultimately theirs – they will live with the knowledge of its inevitability, of the finiteness of their life.

And then a new character comes on stage – the serpent, 'the most cunning of all the creatures *the Lord God had made*' – sadly, far more cunning than woman and man. "Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat from any tree of the garden?" (Genesis 3:1). It sounds so innocent on the surface – but we should remember that fruit was what the human pair lived off. Implicit in the question is a suggestion of, 'Why ever should God have made a tree and forbidden it? What kind of God would do that to you?' The serpent's success came not in getting Eve to taste the fruit – but before that, when he made her think about the tree itself, about its desirability, about the unfairness of being forbidden to eat. Her attention was distracted from living and enjoying God's goodness to questioning God's wisdom and loving care.

It is as if God, like an over-protective father, had accidentally achieved the very thing he wanted to avoid. By trying to keep the children from the pain of knowledge, God led them to seek it; in trying to keep them in the Garden of Eden, in the paradise of childhood, God had given them the impetus to step outside – and once outside, there was no way back. . . . Lost innocence can only be rediscovered after a long journey through the new-found knowledge; and the journey of humanity, and of each individual person, is a quest to find that state of wholeness again outside the shelter of the garden.

(Jonathan Magonet, *The Rabbi's Bible*, pages 114–5)

Adam and Eve take up the gift of free will that is offered to them by God! They then have to live with the consequences of that choice.

The immediate result was self-awareness. We in the West have, over the centuries, seen their realisation of nakedness and ingenious use of fig leaves as implying sexual awareness. But the meaning is much deeper than this, as the ancient cultures equated nakedness with vulnerability and weakness. Defeated Kings and criminals, for example, were stripped to show that they were powerless. Shame is a deep sense of not being right that makes us want to shield ourselves from others, to hide our true selves from others – and from God. In fear and despair Adam and Eve tried to cover their nakedness and vulnerability – to put on a good front, for clothes give not only a covering and protection, but also express identity and cover up our inner selves.

It is a telling part of the story that these man-made clothes were obviously wholly inadequate. God sent them away from the Garden – but not before he himself had provided them with suitable and effective

clothes (3:21). They may have taken an irrevocable step away from God – but God still had their well being at heart.

Humanity's relationship with God

Adam and Eve's decision had irrevocably broken the relationship with God whereby he walked with them as the evening breeze sprang up, when each delighted in the other's company unreservedly. But commentators like Magonet question whether the Fall was an entirely bad thing. After all, if Adam and Eve had just obeyed (it is argued), they would have behaved like children, and could only have had an infantile relationship with God by letting him take all their decisions for them:

Is the 'Fall' . . . a first, necessary step towards emancipation of humanity, the first liberation from the slavery of the womb? . . . If it is a liberation, however bitter and painful it may be at the moment of separation, then human beings travel bearing a full responsibility for their life and their actions, for their choices and ultimately for their death. And, in terms of biblical faith, they also have the ultimate freedom – to choose or not to choose God, and that, in the end, is what the adventure begun with Abraham is all about.

(The Rabbi's Bible, page 115)

The first 'problem family'

The very first family was also the very first 'problem family', as Genesis 4 recounts – a family where sibling rivalries were so great that one brother jealously murdered the other. The story of Cain and Abel is a sequel to the story of the Fall: it shows the consequences of disobeying God – and it is here that the word 'sin' is first used, when God (still, apparently, on close speaking terms with his human creations) warns Cain of the danger he is in (Genesis 4:7). In a way, says theologian Martin Buber, God is testing out what human beings do with the knowledge gained by eating the forbidden fruit. For the journey back to the special relationship with God which had existed before Adam and Eve's disobedience can now only come from the free choice of human beings to accept God's will over them. And in fact, the rest of the Bible is the story of how this drama of God's search for his missing children, and the human quest for that restored relationship with God, is acted out on the stage of history – culminating in God becoming a human being in order to restore us to intimacy with him.

The story of Cain, the first murderer, and Abel, the first victim, are, suggests Jonathan Magonet, 'prototypes of the choices set before each of us in the face of his or her destiny, his or her frustration, his or her suffering'. The testing of Cain by God becomes the model of all later tests in the Hebrew Bible that challenge the assumptions we make about God, the certainties we think contain the Eternal.

A lot of Water

You can see from the previous two sections that there is far more in these early stories than the contents of a children's book! In fact, we probably do some harm by introducing them to children so soon – it is easy to fail to notice the sophisticated thought later. This is nowhere

more true that the story of Noah and the Ark. Or stories – there are at least two identifiable strands and the repetitions and a few contradictions show that an editor was at work who didn't want to leave anything out, or upset anybody!

So read the story at home: and ask yourself the same questions as before – what does it tell us about God and what about human beings?

Communication Problems?

- Read Genesis Chap 11 1-9

If the previous stories have been intimate portraits of a few people, this is about society on a big scale. And it is important to remember that God is as concerned with the ways that we organise ourselves as a community and a country as with our private and personal lives.

The fault of these people appears to be their desire to build a tower into the heavens, to “make a name for themselves” and so to question God’s sovereignty over their lives. Perhaps this story has echoes of the later Israelites’ desire for a king – to be “like the other nations” and to be victorious in war and conquest. The people also wish to avoid being scattered: they want to create a safe haven for themselves. But God’s purpose is to scatter His people, so that they might fill the earth and the whole earth be blessed through them.

- To what extent do you think our country is tempted to want to be powerful? Do we hanker after past glories?
- Are there any groups you know of who seek security rather than carrying out God’s will in the scary world beyond safety?

Group Work

The early stories

- small groups* 1. Discuss the reading and notes you have prepared – in particular, share any difficulties you, as a twentieth-century Christian, may have had with these early Jewish accounts.
- small groups* 2. What do these stories of human origins tell us about these people’s relationships with each other and with God?

Links between the old and new covenants

Group Leader: arrange for each of the groups to start with a different task from 3–6, so that, if you run short of time, each of them has been covered.

- small groups* 3. Read the following passages:
- Romans 5:12–19
 - 1 Corinthians 15: 20–23.
- What do you think is the significance of seeing Jesus Christ as the ‘new Adam’, as Paul does in these passages?
- small groups* 4. Read Luke 15:11–32. How does this parable of two brothers and a loving father throw light on the Cain and Abel story? Does it add anything to the Old Testament story?
- small groups* 5. Read Matthew 14:22–33. Think about the similarities and differences between this story, and the story of Noah’s ark: how does each throw light on the other, especially in the areas of faith and trust?
- small groups* 6. Read Acts 2:1–24. In what ways can the gift of languages given at Pentecost be seen as a sign of healing the division and lack of communication which happened at Babel? Is this part of the new covenant? If so, what had changed?
- full group* 7. Feed back the results of your reflections and discussions on questions 3–6.

Old Testament overview

- full group* 8. What have you learned about the Old Testament over the course of this session and Unit 1?
- full group* 9. What do you think might be the value of the Old Testament for the Church today – and in what ways might we use it to guide and nourish a Christian community?

Session 2

Jesus' Story: Setting the Scene

Aims

- To explore the historical background to the New Testament;
- To think further about the relationship of the Old and New Testaments;
- To discover more about Paul's letter to Philemon;
- To learn about the content of the New Testament.

Preparing for the Session

1. To refresh your memory, look back at:
 - The preparatory reading for Session 3 of Unit 1, especially the section entitled 'The New Testament';
 - Questions 3–6 (and notes you made, if any) of the Group Work for Session 1.
2. Read 'Opening up the New Testament'.

Opening Up the New Testament

Most Christians are more familiar with the New Testament (or at least, with parts of it) than with the Old. We probably read it much more often, both in church and at home – and most sermons are based on New Testament passages. Besides, we are Christians, and the New Testament therefore feels much closer to us than the Old, because it is directly about Jesus: it is more obviously a Christian book.

This familiarity has benefits – but also disadvantages, for it means that we bring to our studies even more preconceived ideas than we brought to the Old Testament. We can perhaps glimpse some of our assumptions by thinking about how we imagine Jesus: do we share the Victorian picture of a fair-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jesus? Or (less likely) the Rastafarian picture of Jesus as a Black African? How we imagine Jesus may well tell us more about ourselves and our

presuppositions than about Jesus, the Middle Eastern Jew of first-century Palestine.

There will be a number of occasions during this Unit when you are asked to approach a familiar New Testament story as if you'd never heard it or read it before. This can be a helpful way of hearing its message afresh, and of recognising some of the accretions of the centuries, never mind of our own experiences, which can come between us and the passage.

Our understanding of New Testament texts is also greatly increased as we learn more about the circumstances in which they were written. This background reading covers briefly three areas:

1. The historical and social setting in which Jesus lived;
2. The background to the writings found in the New Testament;
3. Links in theme and subject-matter between Old and New Testaments.

These approaches are not intended to cast doubt on ways in which you have read and understood the New Testament up to now, but aim to help you hear its message even more clearly.

1 The Palestinian world

The last events to be clearly described in the Old Testament were the return from exile, and the rule of the Persian empire, as described in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. The Persians ruled Palestine for about 200 years, and were succeeded by the Greeks (under Alexander the Great) – then by Egyptian and Syrian rulers. This was followed by about 100 years of Jewish independence before Jerusalem was captured by the Romans in 63 BC, and Judaea became part of the Roman province of Syria, ruled first by a dynasty of puppet-kings, the Herods, and then by a Roman procurator, ruling under the Roman governor of Syria. The best-known procurator, from New Testament accounts, is Pontius Pilate who governed Judaea from AD 26–36. From this time on, trouble constantly flared up in the region, leading at last to a general revolt against the Romans, savagely punished by the total destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The world into which Jesus was born, then, was dominated by the Roman Empire, under Augustus Caesar. However, the Romans continued to encourage the Greek way of life – Greek was the common language of the empire, though educated people also knew Latin. This all-pervasive Greek culture is called 'Hellenism' (after 'Hellas', the name for Greece).

There were divisions among the Jewish people of Palestine (i.e. present-day Israel, roughly speaking). All believed in the authority of the Torah and the importance of temple sacrifices – but they varied in how these beliefs should be worked out in daily life:

- **Sadducees**, from upper-class priestly families, believed in tolerance and compromise with the ruling powers; their chief loyalty was to the Torah – the first five books of our Bible.

- **Pharisees** (the name means ‘separated ones’) were also devoted to the Torah, but to other books of Scripture as well; some of them were full-time students of the Jewish Scriptures, some had ordinary jobs as well. Their chief concern was keeping God’s rules and remaining pure; they were against violent opposition to the ruling powers.
- **Zealots** shared the beliefs of the Pharisees – but not their views of the Romans. They used guerrilla tactics to get rid of them.
- The **Essenes** of the Qumran community, beside the Dead Sea, were a sect who studied the law and waited diligently for the coming of the Messiah; they looked forward to a day when God would intervene in history and they alone in Israel would be recognised as God’s covenant people.
- The **Scribes** were professional interpreters of the law, both civil and religious, and its application. Their decisions became the oral law, or ‘tradition of the elders’ mentioned in the gospels. Scribes were influential – each scribe had his own disciples, and many belonged to the Sanhedrin.
- The **Sanhedrin** was the supreme Jewish court, made up of 70 members plus the high priest. It had its own police force, and could arrest and try people – though if it passed the death sentence, this had to be endorsed by Rome before the sentence could be carried out.
- **Synagogues** probably sprang up as Jews were taken into exile, far from the Jerusalem temple that had been their centre of worship. Synagogues were plain buildings, in no way like the magnificent temple; there were no sacrifices, just the reading of the Torah and prayers. In towns and villages the synagogue became the place where Jews met and shared life – courts and schools were held there. Jewish people still tried to go annually to the temple in Jerusalem.
- **Samaritans** (from Samaria, the capital city of pre-exilic Israel), were despised by the pure-blooded Jews because they had interbred with the nations sent in by the Assyrians to repopulate the land. The Jews had not let the Samaritans help in rebuilding the temple. Rivalry and tension grew, and in time the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, a holy place since the time of Moses.

In the time of Jesus, Palestine was an agricultural economy, producing olives, olive oil, wines and cereal crops, including rice. Most people ate beans, peas and pulses rather than expensive meat – and communities at the coast or around Lake Galilee ate fish, which was also salted and exported. Dates too were exported, as well as being enjoyed locally – and other fruit, such as figs, was grown. Chicken, geese and ducks were kept, as well as sheep, goats and cattle. Bees were kept for their honey, and wealthier farmers had one or two oxen for ploughing and threshing. For many people, though, hunger was a daily reality – and finding food for their family in a largely desert land could be a problem. This also gave landowners considerable power – they could control the food supply, and therefore the local economy and people.

Pottery was made throughout the country; clothes were made from wool or from flax which grew there. Tyrian purple, a costly dye used for expensive material, was produced along the Judaeian coast from the shells of crustaceans. The Dead Sea provided asphalt used in ship-building. Because there are relatively easy routes through Palestine, bounded by the sea to the west and mountains to the east, many traders travelled through the country and it was (and still is) a region that other powers wanted to control.

2 What is the 'New Testament'?

In Unit 1 of this course we discovered that the Old Testament is not a book of rules for behaviour or belief – but a collection of books telling the story of a community of faith, and of how it responded to God at varying times and in different situations. The New Testament is a similar collection of books, also about a community of faith. So we shall start by asking similar questions to those we asked about the Old Testament.

What's the New Testament about?

The Exile – a momentous event (in Jewish terms) – gave the impetus to the creation of the Old Testament in its present form. What lies behind the New Testament is not so much an event as a person. It is the story of Jesus – his life, death and resurrection – and of the impact he made on those around him, together with its meaning as understood by the earliest Christians. In Paul's phrase, Christians saw themselves 'in Christ' – a community with a new identity based on the experience of forgiveness and the new life of the Holy Spirit. This Christian community of faith crossed barriers – as Paul explains: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). These profound divisions of race, background, status, gender (which still flourish today), are irrelevant in this new kind of community. And the 27 books of the New Testament were written to and for early Christian communities to help them in their specific settings – either by telling them about the story of Jesus, or by enabling them to understand the meaning and relevance of that story for their own lives and growth.

Who wrote it?

Apart from Hebrews, all the books of the New Testament are linked with an author's name (it wasn't until the fourth century that people began to link Paul's name with the letter to the Hebrews, and few would now accept this). Some of the books may indeed have been written by, or dictated by, or inspired by, the given 'author'; for example, few disagree that many of Paul's letters stem directly from the apostle himself.

Others may have been linked with a famous name to give a text authority – the facts about who actually wrote a letter or gospel was much less important to the first-century world than it would be today. It is now widely held, for example, that the Pastoral Epistles – 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus – are imitations of Paul's genuine letters, being written well after the apostle's death.

When was it written?

The best answers are educated guesses, deduced from the historical background implied in the writings, and linked to known dates. Paul's letters are the earliest documents of the New Testament – and 1 Thessalonians is probably the earliest of these, being written in the late 40s, only about 15–20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The first of the gospels is Mark, written around AD 65. The last books to be written are thought to be 2 Peter and Jude, at around AD 110–120.

Why was it written?

Any piece of writing varies according to its recipient: a letter to your bank manager about an overdraft is very different from a letter you might write to a friend telling them you're in the red – though the actual facts behind them might be the same. So to establish why a book was written, we need first to know who it was intended for and (as far as possible) what were their circumstances. The answers to these questions give us a context in which to understand the words on the page.

So, for example, scholars have identified certain types of material in the New Testament books:

- Elements of worship – credal statements, hymns and prayers, and perhaps even sermon extracts;
- Proclamations of the good news, to help the first Christians explain themselves to those around them;
- Teaching – to help community members learn about the faith, through the stories of Jesus or through direct instruction;
- Theological reflection to help them deal with specific local problems – perhaps of persecution, or of abuses within the Christian community, or whatever.

What kind of material does it contain?

The New Testament contains four main types of writing:

- letters ('epistles')
- gospels
- history
- apocalyptic writing.

Letters were a well-established form in the Graeco-Roman world. Paul, and other Christian epistle-writers, have taken the form and adapted it for their own purposes (as outlined in the Group Work below). The gospel, however, is a completely new literary form – though the gospel writers may well not have realised they were creating something unique. They are not biographies as we understand them today – they contain very little about Jesus' life (his appearance, childhood, times and places) and concentrate instead on his actions and words. They tell of the good news which is embodied in the person of Jesus, as well as announced by him. All of them give a large amount of space to the last week of his life, to his trial and crucifixion.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles, sometimes referred to as 'volume 2 of Luke's gospel', is the only overtly historical book of the New Testament. It tells of the beginnings and spread of the early Church. The book of Revelation is the main example of apocalyptic writing in the New Testament – though there are short passages in the gospels, and not all of Revelation is apocalyptic. This follows a particular style of Jewish writing (found particularly in Daniel in the Old Testament) – Session 8 has more on this.

3. Links between Old and New Testaments

It is important not to draw oversimplified conclusions from the fact that the Old Testament is a Jewish collection of books and the new Testament a Christian collection. The links between the two, in theme, approach and content, are many. Jesus and his disciples were practising Jews – and the first Christians continued to worship in the Jerusalem temple. The Old Testament was the Bible for the first Christians, and for our Lord himself. Whenever we find references to 'the Scriptures' in the New Testament, they are references to what we call the Old Testament.

As Christians we might say that the New Testament inaugurates a new era of God's relationship with human beings. There is continuity with the Old Testament though: we recognise a God who wants relationship with his creation, who wants loving intimacy not a blind obedience of rules; a God whom people worship and praise, because that is an appropriate response; a God who gives his people a vision of his kingdom – a society founded on justice, love and peace. And – perhaps a hard aspect for us to grasp today – a God for whom sacrifice is important. The Old Testament tells us that God wants the sacrifice of inner repentance more than the blood of sacrificial animals. In the New Testament, Jesus himself is the sacrifice once for all; yet part of following this way involves taking up our cross, being willing to 'lose our lives' for his sake – being a *living* sacrifice.

In moving from Old to New Testament studies, then, we have not moved into a wholly different world – but into a new chapter. Clearly the New Testament writers valued the Old Testament, and believed that they were part of the same story. It is helpful, then, to keep in mind some of the great themes and characters of Unit 1 of the course as we approach this new part of the story of God and humankind.

Group Work

Discovering the New Testament

1. Discuss the preparatory reading: what did you learn from it (if anything) that you didn't previously know about the New Testament and its world?

Full group

Full group

2. Look at the maps at the beginning of this workpack, and discover whether group members have travelled in the areas covered, on holiday or pilgrimage. If so, share briefly your impressions of:
 - the weather
 - the type of land (hilly, fertile, desert or whatever)
 - any ancient or traditional sites you have visited, and what struck you about them (e.g. size, type of buildings, ways of life, etc)

How (if at all) did such visits affect your ideas about New Testament times?

Small groups

Old and New

3. The following statements offer suggestions as to why it is important for us, as Christians, to know something about the Old Testament. Place them in the order of importance you would give them:
 - (a) because it points forward to Christ;
 - (b) because the New Testament writers keep referring to it;
 - (c) because it was the Bible of Jesus and the apostles;
 - (d) because it explains the problem to which the New Testament is the solution;
 - (e) because it is the first part of the story;
 - (f) because it tells us how to behave;
 - (g) because it gives us the social and political side of the gospel;
 - (h) because it reveals the nature of God and his purposes for the world;
 - (i) because it reflects the struggle of a community to understand God and his purpose.

What other links do you see between the worlds of the Old and New Testaments?

Full group

4. Share the results of your discussions in Task 3.

Philemon – or The Runaway Slave

From general reflections on the New Testament, we now turn to look at one short book, Paul's letter to Philemon.

Small groups

5. Read together Paul's letter to Philemon. Discuss what the letter is about and what are its themes.

Small groups

6. Paul's letters, however long or short, tend to follow a familiar structure, having the following parts:
 - ⇒ **Salutation** (naming the writer, the recipient and offering a greeting);
 - ⇒ **Thanksgiving**

⇒ **Main body of letter** (often closing with the promise of a visit)

⇒ **Ethical instructions**

⇒ **Closing** (greetings, doxology, benediction)

- Together, see how Philemon fits this general shape: what verses form which part of the letter?
- What persuasive techniques does Paul use to try to get his readers to agree with his viewpoint?

Full group

7. Share your work on Philemon, then discuss the following questions:

This letter reminds us that we are looking at texts from a different time and culture. Do you think we can use them to answer ethical questions today? For example,

- what do you think, from this letter, are Paul's views on slavery?
- How do you think we, as Christians today, should respond to his views?
- What problem does this raise about the way in which Christians today can use or interpret New Testament texts?

Reading to Follow Up the Session

For reference, and for reading through if you wish, a list of New Testament books, with brief summaries, follows below. Also of interest may be:

John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity*, OUP.

An excellent introduction to Paul's letters and themes, for the serious student.

John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament*, Lion.

Chapter 1, 'The World of the First Christians', describes the cultural, religious and historical background very readably.

The Books of the New Testament

1 The Gospels

Matthew

Written for a Jewish church coming to terms with the spread of the Gospel to Gentiles, this gospel emphasises the teachings of Jesus, and includes the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5–7).

Mark

The shortest and earliest gospel, Mark is traditionally understood to be based on Peter's recollections. It has a direct, almost breathless style and emphasises the authority of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God.

Luke

The only gospel to be written by a Gentile, Luke contains many parables and stories that appear nowhere else (e.g. the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the account of the walk to Emmaus). A feature of Luke is Jesus' concern for the disadvantaged, such as women, the poor and other social outcasts. His gospel contains a great deal of teaching on money.

John

John is radically different from the other three gospels. It is built around seven 'signs', which for those with spiritual eyes to see, reveal who Jesus is. Jesus' teaching also centres on his own identity (as shown in the 'I am' sayings).

2 History

The Acts of the Apostles

A sequel to Luke's Gospel, this consists of an account of the history of the early Church, especially of Paul's missions around the Mediterranean world. It shows how in the power of the Holy Spirit the gospel was taken from Jerusalem to Rome, the capital of the Empire.

3 Epistles (Letters)

Romans

Paul's longest letter, it mainly consists of an extended theological argument about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the Church, and deals with the question of the basis for salvation – obedience to the Jewish Law, or faith in Christ? Romans has been extremely important in the development of Christian theology since Paul's time.

1 Corinthians

Paul's letter is largely concerned with how the Corinthian Christians should relate to the society around them, and how the church should organise its own affairs. Although the Corinthian church appears to be lively and 'spiritual', Paul is especially critical of its worldliness and lack of love.

2 Corinthians

This deals further with Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth. In it, he responds to challenges to his authority by giving a lengthy and heartfelt explanation of the significance of suffering and weakness in Christian service.

Galatians

The angriest of Paul's letters, this deals with the theme of 'justification by faith, in the light of the errors of the Galatians.

Ephesians

Possibly a circular letter, intended for distribution to a large number of congregations, this letter sets out to give a large-scale theological overview of God's purpose for the Church and detailed instructions on how Christians should live in the light of that purpose.

Philippians

Written from prison, this is Paul's gentlest letter, thanking the Christians in Philippi for their support and encouraging them to loyalty and generosity.

Colossians

The Colossian Church had been affected by heretical teaching calling itself 'wisdom', which down-graded the importance of Jesus. Paul sets out to demonstrate the centrality of Jesus for Christian faith and where true Christian wisdom lies.

1 Thessalonians

Probably Paul's earliest surviving letter, this was written to encourage a young church facing persecution. It deals with themes about God's plan for history and the role of Jesus in bringing in the end-time.

2 Thessalonians

The Thessalonians seem to have got very hung up about the end of the world, so Paul writes further to set them right.

1 Timothy

Pastoral advice to Timothy, who was appointed by Paul to be a church leader in Ephesus.

2 Timothy

Further advice on how to live faithfully as a Christian pastor under pressure.

Titus

Pastoral advice to Titus (who seems to have had a similar role to Timothy's, but in Crete).

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are often called Pastoral Epistles. They are widely thought to be imitations of Paul's genuine letters, and to date from a time well after Paul's death.

Philemon

Paul's most personal letter, dealing with the problem of a runaway slave, Onesimus.

Hebrews

No one knows who was the author of Hebrews, but it was clearly written to Jewish Christians under pressure from fellow-Jews to renounce their faith. It is a treatise on Jesus, the Christian life and the hope of salvation, with much discussion of Old Testament texts.

James

A collection of practical instructions on how Christians should behave. There are many links between James and the Sermon on the Mount.

1 Peter

A pastoral letter to Christians throughout Asia Minor encouraging them to stand firm in a time of persecution. Some think this may originally have been an Easter sermon, as it deals mainly with themes of baptism and resurrection.

2 Peter

Almost entirely concerned with the end-time, this letter has much in common with Jude, and is probably one of the latest writings in the New Testament.

1 John

Shares many of the themes of John's gospel – it may have been written for the same community, if not by the same person. A main theme is the love which Christians should show each other, in response to God's love for them.

2 John

A warning against the dangers of doctrinal error.

3 John

A short letter on a problem of discipline.

Jude

A denunciation of 'error' in the church.

The letters from 1 Peter to Jude are sometimes called the general, or catholic, epistles, because they were felt to be addressed to all Christians – as opposed to Paul's letters, which were to specific communities.

4 Apocalyptic writing

Revelation

Full of complex symbolism, Revelation appears to be chiefly concerned with the end-time and the role of Christ in the new world which will follow the end of this one. However, when the symbolism is deciphered it contains a message for all times about the victory of Christ over evil and death.

Session 3

Paul: The Man and his Message

Aims

- To learn more about Paul's life and work, and his significance for the early Church;
- To explore Paul's letter to the Galatians;
- To make further links between the New Testament world and that of today.

Preparing for the Session

1. Read Acts 9:1–30; Acts 22:3–21; Galatians 1:11–20.
 - Do they tell the same story?
 - What are the differences, and are they significant?
 - What might be the reasons for the differences?
2. Read 'Paul and his Letters'.

Paul and his Letters

When we read books, we expect to start at the beginning – especially if the beginning is the story of someone's birth. But although the New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus, this is not where our study starts. Just as Genesis is the story of beginnings, but is not the earliest piece of writing in the Old Testament, so the gospels – the stories of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection – aren't where the written record of the New Testament actually begins.

In the beginning . . .

Without Jesus there would have been no good news, no Christian church. As the book of Acts records, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, the apostles and others soon began telling people about Jesus and what he meant to them. And as they travelled around telling

people about Jesus, so little communities of believers came into existence – the first churches.

The members of those first churches often had questions about the good news to which no one had yet thought of answers – or they allowed other missionaries to corrupt the message (as in Galatia), or they misunderstood it (as in Corinth), resulting in various kinds of wrongdoing. The apostles dealt with these issues by writing letters to the churches they had already started. Some of these letters are the earliest parts of the New Testament – and the earliest surviving letters come from Paul.

Paul had a fine mind, and the advantages of a Hellenistic upbringing in Tarsus (in the Roman province of Cilicia), as well as being a Roman citizen – a privilege which relatively few Jews enjoyed; he also had a Jewish legal training, and was a Pharisee before his conversion to Christianity. He stood in contrast to the Jerusalem-based apostles in his emphasis on mission to non-Jews and in some of his practical applications of the gospel message. He was a linear thinker, who liked to argue his case from first principles – this meant that he was always going back to the basic fundamentals of the good news. But we can detect disputes about the nature of the Christian Gospel from the early letters and from the Book of Acts. The Jewish Christian community probably did not entirely sever links with other Jews for at least a century, which Paul was convinced of the radically new message of Christ.

These earliest Christian churches didn't have the gospels as we know them. They would have had stories about Jesus, told them by the people who had brought them the good news. In fact, almost nothing about Jesus' life or teaching is found in Paul's letters – either because he didn't know the Jesus-tradition in any detail, or because he assumed his readers were familiar with it; instead, Paul emphasises Jesus' death, resurrection and exaltation, and the significance of these momentous events for all humankind: that through them, Jesus had opened the way to heaven for all humankind.

Paul was an extraordinary and influential man – someone with a passion for his Lord; someone who saw himself as being very specially called by God. It has often been suggested that the Church as we know it owes far more to the teaching and character of Paul than of Jesus – for it was Paul, in his letters, who gave direct instructions to the first churches, who set them on their path; and it was Paul who wrote more of the New Testament than anybody else. Seven of its books are certainly by him (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon); two more are probably by him (Colossians and 2 Thessalonians); and one more may be his (Ephesians).

Paul made at least three great missionary journeys around the Mediterranean world, preaching, teaching and establishing groups of Christians in many towns, cities and regions. And he continued to keep in touch with these young churches through his letters.

The Letters

It is easy for us to forget that many of the New Testament writings are letters – and that letters are a very particular way of communicating, with

their own strengths and weaknesses. There are four important things to bear in mind about letters:

1 *Pastoral, not systematic*

Paul's letters are not theological treatises, giving a systematic account of Christian principles, creeds and behaviour. They are personal messages, addressed to particular people in specific situations – and Paul writes as a missionary pastor, with the spiritual and practical concerns of the recipients uppermost in his mind and heart. So, for example, Paul nowhere gives a thorough statement of the relationship between the Jewish Law and the Christian Gospel – instead he deals with issues and problems as they arise in Corinth, Galatia, Rome, and so on, with his reflections and emphases on Law and Gospel varying according to whom he was writing.

2 *Beware of simple comparisons*

We must be careful about comparing something in one letter with something in another, without taking into account the different circumstances for which they were written. We can't just collect everything Paul says on a subject, without regard for the contexts. But we *can* look for his underlying meanings and consistency in his writings.

3 *A one-sided view*

Paul's letters only give us one side of the dialogue. For example, as we shall see in Session 3, the letter we call '1 Corinthians' was part of an extended exchange of letters – and was certainly not the first that Paul had written to the church in Corinth. And 1 Corinthians was in fact a reply from Paul to a series of issues and questions which the Corinthians had raised in a letter to him – a letter which hasn't survived. So, when Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:1, writes, 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman' this could be a quote from a phrase from the Corinthians' letter to him, in order to respond to it! (There is no punctuation in Greek text). Again, we need to discover, as far as possible, what targets Paul is aiming at in order to understand why he writes as he does.

4 *Where is 'the message'?*

Paul's letters are all to Christian converts. They've not been written in order to win people for Christ, but to help them explore what Christian living means for them, in their own situations. He only occasionally refers to his missionary preaching, and we have to deduce from these brief references what Paul's proclamation of the Gospel actually was. (For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 he gives a summary of his message, the core of which is 'that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day'.)

The letter-structure

In the group-work for Session 2, you looked at the way in which the epistle to Philemon fitted into the letter-form used by Paul. He naturally followed the common letter-writing style of his day, a simple example of which can be found in Acts 23:26–30. An ancient letter usually followed a set pattern – we'll now consider this in more detail, and look at the ways in which Paul adapted it for his specific purposes.

Salutation

- A letter began with the writer's name, and then the name of the recipient.
- Then followed the greeting, usually a single word. Paul often expanded this to include the traditional Hebrew greeting (shalom, peace) together with a new, Christian greeting ('grace' – in Greek very similar to the normal everyday greeting).

Thanksgiving

Greek letters then contained a polite expression of thanks for the good health of the person addressed. Paul usually expanded this into a general thanksgiving to God for all that was praiseworthy in those to whom he was writing.

Main body of letter

In Paul's letters, the main part of the letter was often divided into two parts:

- doctrinal teaching (often in response to questions raised by readers, or relating to problems within their Christian community);
- ethical instructions – i.e. advice on how they had to behave, what the teaching meant in terms of Christian living.

Closing

- Personal news and greeting – in Paul's case this was often news of the churches and prominent people in them;
- Paul also often added a note of exhortation or blessing in his own handwriting, as a kind of guarantee of the genuine and personal nature of the letter;
- Finally, ancient letters usually ended with a single word of farewell. Paul almost always expanded this into a full blessing and prayer for his readers.

Preparation (continued)

3. Read through the whole of Paul's letter to the Galatians in a modern translation. (Read steadily through, without stopping at parts that are not completely clear. The overall meaning is what matters hear.)
4. Using the letter-structure outlined here, look again at Galatians and try to work out whether it fits the structure:
 - What chapters and verses belong to which part?
 - Are there any parts which don't appear?
5. Read 'You Foolish Galatians!'

You Foolish Galatians!

Some scholars think that Galatians is Paul's earliest letter (written in 48AD), some that it was written perhaps 10 years later than this. All agree, though, that it is different from his other letters in two respects:

- it's perhaps Paul's most personal letter – he is sad, as well as being fed up and frustrated, at the Galatians' slowness to grasp the twin principles of freedom and equality within the Christian community;
- it's not written to a cluster of city-based communities, but to 'the churches in Galatia' – a large Roman colony in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), with a number of quite separate cities, as mentioned in Acts 14, which tells of Paul and Barnabas in the region.

So the issues Paul covers in this circular letter are clearly widespread – and are to do with the transition from Christianity as a sect within Judaism, with mainly Jewish followers, to Christianity as a new branch of faith, open to all believers. Paul's key phrase is 'in Christ': this changes all people's relationships – with themselves, with God, with each other. He uses the phrase not only to describe individuals, but also the Christian community. And the phrase crops up in two key verses in Galatians, each of which addresses one of the key themes:

- **the theme of equality** ('There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus', 3:28 – a verse thought by many to be quoted by Paul from a very early Christian baptismal formula).
- **the theme of liberation** ('For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!', 6:15);

The early Church contained Jews who believed that Gentiles, when they became Christians, should follow Jewish laws and customs. These Jewish Christians had visited the churches in Galatia and spread doubt and division in three main areas:

1 Paul not an apostle

Paul, so these Jews had said, had no right to be founding churches because he had no authorisation from the Jerusalem church. Paul

responds with a brief autobiography, offering his credentials, which centre on his face-to-face encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road (1:11–12).

2 Christians and the Old Testament

The Law was not, as some Jewish Christians had claimed, the reason why the Galatians had received God's Spirit. Faith in Jesus was the key – and being a Jewish lawyer, Paul argues his case from the Old Testament itself, citing Abraham's faith and the fact that the Law was merely preparing the way for God's new act of grace in Jesus Christ. Christians are the true heirs of Abraham.

3 Freedom and legalism

The Jewish Christians had insisted that circumcision and keeping the Law were part of the Christian life. Paul makes it clear that externals aren't important. The Galatian Christians are different from the pagans around them not through these outward signs, but because their lives are being transformed by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. And Paul makes it clear that this is no easy option: being 'crucified' to the world (6:14) means dying to themselves, and accepting Jesus as Saviour and Lord over every aspect of their lives. In Galatians, 'circumcision' stands for relying on something other than Christ alone.

These truths are for the whole community to claim, not just individual people. For this letter shows how social was Paul's gospel – most of the fruits of the Spirit (5:22) are qualities connected with relationships, not with an inner life of tranquillity and isolated communion with God. And most of the sins mentioned (5:19–21) are social too, concerning wrong relationships with others.

Experience is the key

Personal experience is an underlying theme of Galatians. Paul's authority comes from his own experience of Jesus; and he calls the Galatians back to their senses by demanding that they reflect on how they first came to be Christians (3:1–5). Others recognised the fruits of this inner experience (e.g. 2:9), and it was this indwelling Spirit which enabled Christians to offer true worship to God (4:6), to experience love and joy even in the midst of suffering, and which brought liberty from the rule-book mentality of fear and legalisms (5:25–6).

The freedom Paul describes in Galatians 5:1 and 5:13 is in stark contrast to what he wrote in 1 Corinthians (as we shall see in Session 4), where people were abusing freedom, leading to a lack of love. The Corinthians needed him to curb them; the Galatians, by contrast, needed encouragement to enjoy their freedom as children of God, to live out the freedom of their conversion – and to do this through love: 'For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another'. The specific situation is vastly different from that in Corinth, and Paul deals very differently with each. But the underlying message is the same: give way to each other, be slaves to each other, in love, in Christ.

Group Work

Paul and his writings

- Full group* 1. Read 2 Corinthians 11:21–33, and Philippians 3:1–11. Taking these passages along with the work you did for Task 1 of the preparation, discuss what picture emerges of Paul as a person, and as a Christian leader.
- Small groups* 2. Discuss Task 4 of the preparation work.
- Which elements are missing from Galatians?
 - Why do you think they might be missing, even though they are included in all Paul's other letters?

The messages of Galatians

- Small groups* 3. Each group should discuss one of the following passages:
- Galatians 3:1–5;
 - Galatians 3:23–28;
 - Galatians 5:13–6:5.
- Make sure that your discussions answer the following questions:
- What does this passage mean?
 - What is its relevance to the problem Paul is discussing here?
 - What does it mean today, firstly for us as individuals, and secondly for us as church?
- Full group* 4. Feed back your answers, so that everyone has covered each of the passages.

Paul's letters today

- Small groups* 5. Using the form of Paul's letters described in the preparatory reading, try to write a short letter to your local church in which you:
- thank God for the good things about it as a Christian community;
 - reflect on what might be some of the weaknesses – if nothing springs to mind, perhaps you could think about where your church stands on the issues that have come up in Galatians – e.g. about the place of personal experience, about freedom (or a lack of it) in Christ, about the evidence of spiritual fruit;
 - think how you might suggest that these are remedied (e.g. by prayer? or actions? or Bible study? or different types of service? or outreach?)

Full group

6. Read your letters out to each other, leaving time to discuss the similarities and differences.

Group members: please remember to bring your letters so that you can look at them again when working on Session 4.

Closing the Session

Full group

7. Pray together for the Christian communities represented in your group and covered in Task 5. Close with the Grace – as Paul often closes his letters.

Reading to Follow Up the Session

Donald Coggan, *Meet Paul*, SPCK, 1997

David Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul*, Continuum, 2000

Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone – Galatians and Thessalonians*, SPCK, 2002

What St Paul really said Lion Hudson 2003

Colin Morris *Epistles to the Apostle* Hodder and Stoughton 1974 (*well worth trying to find a secondhand copy of this imaginative and scholarly attempt to write the letters that Paul received*).

Session 4

A Tale of Two Churches

Aims

- To learn about the first Christian communities, in the period before the gospels were written;
- To find out about the social and historical setting of the church in Corinth;
- To explore how a study of 1 Corinthians can help us as Christians today.

Preparing for the Session

4. Read the following passages:

- Acts 2:42–47
- 1 Corinthians 1:1–25
- 1 Corinthians 5:1–6:20
- 1 Corinthians 8:1–13
- 1 Corinthians 10:1–12:31

5. Make notes for discussion at the group session on the life of the church in Corinth – and especially on how it seems to compare with the very first Christian community as described in Acts 2:42–47. You may find it helpful to use the following headings:

- Relationships
- Worship
- Ministry
- Belief.

6. Read 'Community and Crisis'.

Community and Crisis

The description of the first Christian community (Acts 2:42–47) is an infuriatingly brief caricature. We want to know more about how it

worked, who belonged, how much it was a community of its time, or whether all Christian communities should follow its example.

Even allowing for the author's desire to paint a happy, peaceful picture (a familiar characteristic of Luke, as we shall see in Session 6), it still sounds a remarkable community. William Barclay describes nine characteristics:

- It was **a learning church** – people listened to the apostles as they taught (verse 42).
- It was **a church of togetherness** (verse 42).
- It was **a praying church** (verse 42).
- It was **a reverent church** – everyone felt 'a sense of awe' (verse 43).
- It was **a church where things happened** – there were many portents and signs (verse 43).
- It was **a sharing church** (verses 44–45).
- It was **a worshipping church** (verse 46).
- It was **a joyful church** (verse 46).
- It was **a church whose members others couldn't help liking** (verse 47).

And we could add another one:

- It was **a growing church** (verse 47).

As we saw in Session 3, most of the New Testament letters were written in response to problems in the early Church – which might give us an idea that it was all problems. This passage in Acts is a helpful counterbalance, offering a rich and positive picture of church life.

But this was a far cry from the experiences in Corinth in the mid-50s AD
...

Life in Corinth

Corinth was a bustling sea-port in present-day Greece. It had been an ancient Greek city, but was rebuilt as a Roman colony in 46 BC. It was a prosperous trading centre – and had a reputation for tolerating vice of every kind. Paul visited Corinth during his second missionary journey (a trip which lasted from the late 40s to the early 50s AD), spending 18 months there and using it as his headquarters. Acts 18 tells us some of the background: Paul followed his trade as a tent-maker there, and began his work in the Jewish synagogue. Opposition caused him to leave the synagogue, and start preaching from the home of a new Christian, Titus Justus, who lived next door. Many people of all kinds responded to Paul's message – a large and influential Christian congregation was quickly established in Corinth.

Paul and the Corinthian church

The background to some of Paul's letters (e.g. Galatians and Thessalonians) is related in the book of Acts. But we don't know from any outside sources about the historical background to his letters to Corinth. Instead, we have to piece together the evidence from the letters themselves, from the vague hints Paul gives. It's not surprising they're vague – after all, both Paul and the Corinthians knew the situations and personalities he was addressing. The last thing they could have imagined was a group of students trying to piece the evidence together nearly 2000 years later!

As far as we can tell, then, this is what happened.

During his three-year stay at Ephesus in the mid-50s, Paul received bad news about the Corinthian church. He wrote a letter, now lost but mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, warning them of the dangers of immorality. The Corinthians may well have written back to Paul, with news and questions – and it's thought that the letter we now know as 1 Corinthians was a reply to this. That's why Paul goes through a series of subjects (e.g. 1 Corinthians 7 starts, 'Now concerning the matters about which you wrote . . .') – as if he's ticking off the points they've raised with him.

When the Corinthians took no notice of this letter, he seems to have made a short and 'painful' visit to them, and then to have written another and much stronger letter, mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:4. Many think that this too is lost – though some believe it to be preserved as chapters 10–13 of 2 Corinthians. Then, when news got through to Paul that there had at last been a change of attitude among the Corinthian Christians, he wrote once again, expressing his joy and offering further teaching – probably the material we know as 2 Corinthians chapters 1–9.

What's Paul's letter about?

If one word could summarise the complex situations implied in 1 Corinthians, that word would be 'division'. This division took various forms, which Paul deals with systematically – but all go against Paul's fundamental belief that 'in Christ' there are no longer any divisions; it can be said that Paul's underlying theme in this letter is the importance of unity in Christ, often achieved by *giving way* to others within the Christian community. This, he seems to be saying, is the loving Christian response to others in a whole variety of specific situations, even if we are on opposite sides of the fence – and even if we are technically in the right.

The divisions

Here, then, is a summary of the divisions in the Corinthian church (with references, in brackets, to the sections of the letter which cover the various conflicts); each is followed by 'Paul's theme' – verses which bring out the underlying theme of unity, of giving way to each other (or 'subordination') in Christ, in that specific situation:

- **divisions between sectarian groups** who 'belonged' to one or another founder (1:10–4:21). Paul's theme: '[Do] not be inflated

with pride as you take sides in support of one against another. My friend, who makes you so important?' (4:6–7).

- **divisions between marriage partners** (7:1–40; 11:2–16). Paul's theme: 'For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body but the wife does' (7:4).
- **divisions between stronger and weaker Christians** over the specific issue of food and idol-worship (8:1–11:1). Paul's theme: 'Do not seek your own advantage but that of others' (10:24).
- **divisions between rich and poor in the Christian assembly**, as specifically shown at the Eucharist (11:17–34). Paul's theme: 'So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another' (11:33).
- **divisions between Christians with different spiritual gifts** – and related issues of church order (12:1–14:40). Paul's theme: 'Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way' (13:4–5).
- **divisions over Paul's apostleship** (4:1–21; 9:1–27). Paul's theme, as he lives it out in his own life: 'To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some' (9:22).

Paul is suggesting that the Christian community must be radically different from its surrounding society, where status was all-important. Social and legal status were closely linked – a person's life's structure and opportunities were dictated by whether they were a slave or an owner; whether they were a woman – owned by father or husband – or man; whether they were a poor man or a wealthy man – a factor which affected the slaves and women in their power. In 1 Corinthians 1:26–31, Paul shows the Corinthians how God has overturned worldly systems: the only thing anybody has to boast about, or define their status, is the Lord.

Status, divisions and overcoming them

We can get some understanding of this new type of community which Paul envisions by looking briefly at just one of the divisions mentioned above – the issues arising at the Lord's Supper. This is important too because it is one of the only occasions where Paul quotes the words of Jesus himself, indicating that from the very beginning of the Church, the eucharistic pattern was established and linked closely with the life and death, words and actions, of the founder of Christianity.

At this time, the Eucharist was woven into the context of a full meal, and it seems that at Corinth, it was a 'bring and share' meal – but without the sharing. The German theologian Gerd Theissen has made extensive studies of the Corinthian social background to this community meal. He concludes that there were two situations in Roman society when people of very different social status ate together: one was a *collegium*, a formal dinner at which the holders of civic offices might be given more food than others present; the other was a private banquet where guests of different rank were offered different qualities of food.

Now the Corinthian congregation was far more varied socially than any other contemporary community. The most similar sort of groups were pagan cults (such as the cult of Isis) which admitted women and slaves, but only as separate groups within the cult, not integrated with free-born men. In the Corinthian church, people of all social ranks and background mixed freely. And there may have been an additional practical problem at the Eucharist – workers, especially slaves, may have arrived later than the leisured classes, so the meal may have been well under way, with not much left over, by the time the poorer workers arrived.

Paul's response to the Corinthian abuses of Christian freedom is to go back to basics:

- he points out that the Eucharist is about unity (10:17);
- he tells them that their behaviour 'shows contempt for the church of God' (11:22) – it is an offence to the one they claim to worship;
- he insists that it is the very opposite of Christian love, in humiliating 'those who have nothing' (11:22).

As you may have recognised when working on Philemon in Session 2, Paul is good at the direct challenge – he knows people must change from within because they recognise it's the right thing to do, not just because he says so. So his solution to the problem is:

- to encourage the Corinthian Christians to make their own decision in the light of his words ('Examine yourselves . . .', 11:28);
- to remind them that Christ is their ultimate standard, and judge (11:32);
- to reinforce yet again his message that submission to one another is the role of ALL members of the church (11:33).

Group Work

The community at Corinth

Small groups

1. Share the results of your preparation work, especially the notes you made for Task 2, and any further light thrown on this by the reading in Task 3.
 - What picture of church life in Corinth comes out of your discussion?
 - What was going wrong in the Christian community?

Small groups

2. What do you think we can learn from 1 Corinthians about :
 - How the gospel message was understood between the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the time when the four gospels were written?
 - The expectations of Christians about their own lives and their future in the period before the gospels were written? (You might want to look at chapter 15 in answering this question.)

- Full group* 3. Share the results of your work on Tasks 1 and 2. If there are any disagreements, explore the possible reasons for them.

The church at Corinth and your local church

- Small groups* 4. What do you think Paul's underlying message to the Corinthian Christians might have been?

- Small groups* 5. Discuss the following questions, linking 'them' in first-century Corinth and 'us' in twentieth-century England:

- How does your work on 1 Corinthians throw light on church life today? Or do you think that situations are so different that it is hardly relevant?
- Look again at the 'Epistle' you wrote last week. Are there any issues in your Christian community where people could take to heart Paul's underlying message of giving way to each other for the sake of being united in Christ?

- Full group* 6. Feed back whatever is appropriate from the results of Task 5. Then decide together on just two ways in which Paul's message could make a difference to your local church. How would you set about putting this into practice?

Ending the Session

- Full group* 8. Read aloud 1 Corinthians 13, trying to hear it as if for the very first time. End with a time of prayer, silent or aloud, for love and unity in today's divided Church.

Reading to Follow Up the Session

Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone – 1 Corinthians*, SPCK, 2003.

A straightforward section by section guide through the letter.

C K Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, A & C Black.

A fairly academic commentary, reckoned to be one of the most authoritative.

William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: Acts and The Daily Study Bible: 1 Corinthians*, St Andrew's Press.

Day-by-day commentaries, helpful for Christians wanting to apply the Bible to their own lives.

Session 5

Mark's Good News

Aims

- To learn more about what a 'gospel' is;
- To discover some of the distinctive aspects of Mark's gospel;
- To explore the complex relationship between the events, the writer and the reader.

Preparing for the Session

1. Read through the whole of Mark's gospel in a modern translation, if possible at a single sitting. Try to approach it as if you'd never read any gospel stories before, but are reading Mark afresh. As you read, make a note of anything that strikes you – for example:
 - What seem to be the most important stories or themes?
 - Do you find Mark a good storyteller? (in other words, is his book 'un-put-downable'? Or is it a chore to read?)
 - How interested does Mark seem in the characters in his story?
2. Read 'The Gospels and Mark'.

The Gospels and Mark

Until Mark wrote his story of Jesus, there was no such thing as a 'gospel'. We need to start, then, by asking what kind of a book a 'gospel' is – because the answer to that question will affect how we read not only Mark, but the other three gospels too. We read books or articles differently depending on what kind of writing they are – for example, we approach a magazine's problem page wholly differently from the front page of a newspaper, or a book of poetry, or a novel. So it's important that we discover, as far as possible, what kind of book a 'gospel' is.

What is a gospel?

The English word 'gospel' comes from the Anglo-Saxon '*god spel*', which meant 'good news', or 'a good story'. It's impossible for us to

imagine the expectations of the very first hearers or readers of Mark when they received his opening words: 'The beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Did they expect a biography or a history, travel tales or religious propaganda? As we've already seen, Paul's readers knew what letters were, and would have adapted easily to the minor ways in which Paul adapted the letter-form to suit his purposes. Even the book of Revelation, perhaps to us today the most unfamiliar type of New Testament writing, would have been less bewildering to its first readers who knew the form of Jewish apocalypses. But a *'gospel'*?

Did the gospel writers intend to produce accurate accounts of Jesus' life and work? Or were they writing theological treatises, in the loose framework of a story about Jesus? Were the evangelists writing from personal memory – or were they editors, compilers or anthologists? How did they want readers to react on hearing or reading their gospels?

Then there is a further layer of complication. People might speculate about when a gospel was written, who it was originally written for, or who wrote it and why – but what about the modern reader? What do we bring to a reading of the gospels, with our understandings of the world, our society and our faith-history and experiences?

The way in which scholars (and through them, eventually, people in the pews) have looked at the gospels has changed over the last 100 or so years, during which time there have been four main approaches (It's important to understand that 'criticism' is not used to mean negative or harsh comments, but simply an analytical approach to a book):

1. For a long period in the nineteenth century the gospels were viewed, explored and evaluated as historically reliable records or biographies. (This approach is known as **historical criticism**.)
2. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the gospels were seen as anthologies of different traditions which had been shaped by the life and faith of the early Christian communities for which they were written. They proclaimed certain truths rather than being 'records' of the past. (This approach is known as **form criticism**.)
3. After the second world war, attention turned to the contribution of each evangelist, in particular the way each individual author creates a distinctive picture of the meaning and significance of Jesus by the way he assembles his material. (This approach is known as **redaction criticism**.)
4. Most recently, scholars have tended to use insights drawn from modern literary criticism, and have interpreted the gospels as 'stories' with carefully worked out dramatic plots. (This approach is known as **narrative criticism**.)

It is important to realise that these are not necessarily four completely separate approaches – they may intertwine or overlap to some degree.

As the first gospel-writer, Mark was doing something revolutionary. Not only was he creating a written record of what had been up to then an oral tradition of the words and works of Jesus, but he was boldly creating a book which fused a 'story' (about the man Jesus) with its underlying 'significance' (that Jesus was the Son of God and Saviour of

humankind). Matthew and Luke largely followed Mark's model (as we shall see in Session 5). John was the last of the gospel writers and was probably familiar with at least one of those that already existed. But he in his turn was as revolutionary as Mark, taking the Jesus-story and treating it in a wholly new way.

Both Mark and John borrowed aspects from other contemporary writing-styles, which would have been familiar to their first readers – but they were both also doing something wholly new. New Testament scholar, Graham Stanton compares this to the recent development of TV docu-dramas. Not many years ago, viewers were familiar with TV dramas and with TV documentaries. Dramas were mainly entertainment; documentaries were mainly factual and informative. When documentary dramas first appeared many people were confused: was this 'real'? Was the information accurate? Was it entertainment? But gradually we have got used to the idea that fictional dramatic reconstructions can give information, or enact a viewpoint of today's world.

So Mark's gospel was the first example of a new kind of writing, blending different elements of history, proclamation and story, and becoming a new sort of book, which both told a story and explained something of its significance. Matthew and Luke both took Mark's 'story' element further by adding stories about Jesus' birth, and giving a fuller and more polished presentation of Jesus' life. (Many later 'gospels', which weren't included in the New Testament, go much further down the 'story' path, in an attempt to satisfy curiosity about Jesus' life.) John's gospel, however, places more emphasis on the 'significance' of Jesus than on his story. (Similarly, there are other later writings, known as the 'gnostic gospels', which leave out most of the story in order to explore Jesus' theological significance.) Stanton writes: 'It is part of the genius of the New Testament gospels that "story" and "significance" are held together – albeit sometimes in tension.' For example, when Jesus breaks the bread at the feeding of the 5,000, John makes it clear that the universal significance of both Jesus' teaching and of the eucharist are in view.

Mark's gospel

By the time Mark's gospel was written (AD 65–70), the term 'gospel' was familiar to Christian communities: Paul uses it to describe the proclamation, by word of mouth, concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the hope of his second coming. But Paul did not (apparently) use the word 'gospel' to describe Jesus' actions or teaching. We get a glimpse of an intermediate stage between Paul's 'gospel' and Mark's type of 'gospel' in the description of Peter's preaching to Cornelius (Acts 10:34–43) – where he seems to imply that Jesus' words and deeds might also be a part of this 'good news'.

But if Mark wasn't the first to realise that the 'story' of Jesus' life was also full of significance, as well as the stories of his death and resurrection, Mark does seem to be the first to have written it down.

The background to Mark

When and where?

Surprisingly little is known about the background to Mark's gospel. It is thought to have been written not long before the siege and fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. The place in which it was written is even less certain – early traditions indicating Rome, others suggesting Alexandria in Egypt, or Antioch in Syria.

Who was Mark?

According to a tradition going back to around AD 120, Mark was 'an interpreter of Peter, [who] wrote accurately, howbeit not in order, all that he recalled of what was either said or done by the Lord' (from Eusebius's *Church History*, written in AD 323). Scholars vary in how much weight they give to this theory, which also often links Mark the gospel writer with John Mark mentioned in Acts as an associate of Paul.

Why was it written?

We must assume that Mark had at least half an eye to the needs of the Christian communities to whom he was writing as he selected and ordered his material. This may be the reason, for example, that Mark shows the weaknesses and self-centredness of the disciples – the reader can draw positive lessons from their frailty, not least that they are finally forgiven and their faltering relationship with Jesus restored. A small example of the difference between Mark's honest abrasiveness and Luke's gentle smoothing of any rough edges is found in the account of Peter, James and John asleep in Gethsemane: Mark tells of their falling asleep on three occasions, despite Jesus' pleas, 'because their eyes were heavy'; Luke tells of it happening only once, and says that they were sleeping 'because of grief' (Luke 22:45) – an extraordinarily charitable description by comparison.

Mark also portrays Jesus as being very human – he gets tired, falls asleep in the boat, gets angry when the disciples turn children away. Perhaps Mark wanted to correct a heresy by showing his readers the true humanity of Jesus? Perhaps he included Jesus' teaching on the difficulty and pain of the Christian life in the light of the Jewish revolt and the impending destruction of Jerusalem and its temple – a situation which forced Christians to face the question of whether they were a part of Judaism or a new and separate religion. As Stanton says, 'Mark's purposes are many. He sets out in dramatic form the story of Jesus so that it will be meaningful for faltering and hard-pressed Christians in his own day'.

The content of Mark

Neither Mark, nor any of the other evangelists, were aiming to give an objective, 'scientific' account – they were biased, and proud of it. They were writing propaganda for the Christian faith, and their purpose was to persuade their readers of the truth of the 'gospel'. As we read Mark's gospel story today, we may be struck by the vividness of the narrative,

the quick scene-changes, and the fact that Jesus' impending suffering and death is introduced about halfway through the book, in chapter 8, with chapters 11–16 being devoted to the last week of his life.

Mark's main focus, then, was the sufferings of Jesus himself. His gospel has been described as a 'passion narrative with an extended introduction', and we shall find much the same pattern repeated in all the gospels. It is unlikely that this was Mark's invention, copied by the rest. More likely, it reflects the pattern of stories about Jesus which were circulating by word of mouth among the churches before the gospels were written down. The time spent by each evangelist on the passion of Jesus is quite disproportionate to that spent on his ministry.

In Mark's good news the central theme is the suffering of Jesus, which ends gloriously and victoriously, an encouragement to the Christian Church under persecution. Behind this central aim, which is, indeed, good news to a troubled Church, lie a number of other relevant themes. For instance, Jesus is, from first to last, presented as the Son of God. This is clearly shown in his baptism (1:11), in the transfiguration (9:7), and at the cross (15:39). For Mark, the evangelist, it is further made clear by word and deed; by the witness of others (3:11; 14:61); and by three emphases which run throughout the story:

- **the innocence of Jesus** – to the Jew he died a criminal's death, but Mark shows he was innocent (chapters 2 and 12);
- **the supremacy of God's plan** over humanity's evil (chapter 4 and 8:27–38);
- **the authority of Jesus** – this is constantly affirmed throughout the narrative. We may note his authority:
 - (a) as teacher (1:21–22)
 - (b) over the Jewish Law (7:1–13)
 - (c) over the sabbath (2:27–28)
 - (d) over the temple (11:15–18)
 - (e) over 'the secrets of God's kingdom' (4:10–11)
 - (f) over forgiveness (2:5–12)
 - (g) over unclean spirits (1:27; 3:19–27)
 - (h) over nature (4:35–41; 6:45–52)

Mark starts his gospel by announcing to his reader that it is 'the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. This is swiftly followed by the story of Jesus' baptism, in which God himself confirms Jesus' identity (1:11). Then throughout his story, Mark shows Jesus meeting with all kinds of people, including his own disciples, who simply don't understand what this means in practice – perhaps because they're waiting for a triumphalist Messiah who will come with political power, or because Jesus' ideas of service, of the cross, are so radical that people can't easily swallow them. Mark unfolds the drama of the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God – which culminates in the words of the (Gentile) centurion at the crucifixion: 'Truly this man was God's Son!' (15:39).

Mark's ending

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the ending of Mark's gospel has caused much discussion over the years. As you may see by turning to Mark 16, the most authoritative ancient texts end at 16:8: 'And they [i.e. the women at the tomb] said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid'. Jesus' post-resurrection appearances seem to have been added later. We are so used to the accounts of the other evangelists that we need to adjust our focus to wonder why Mark stopped here?

One possibility is simply that the end of the manuscript was lost – that the gospel didn't end here, but did originally include post-resurrection stories about Jesus. These were lost, and later on, the extra verses (16:8b–20) were added. Another possibility is more intriguing – and perhaps more appealing to the modern reader – and that is that Mark fully intended to leave his book open-ended. He was writing to Christians some 35 years after these events, to people who wouldn't have been Christians at all if the women had indeed remained silent and afraid. They knew from personal experience that this wasn't the end of the story. But perhaps Mark deliberately stops short at this point as a challenge to his readers: the tomb was empty, the angels had announced the resurrection – but they needed messengers, proclaimers of the gospel, to tell people the 'good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Was this a way of engaging his readers with the gospel commission, with which the gospel of Matthew closes (Matthew 28:19–20)? Of telling them that it was up to them whether to remain afraid and silent or to go into all the world and preach the good news?

The overall direction of Mark's story of Jesus results from his primary aim of bringing good news to the community he wrote for, with its own particular needs. By comparing the way in which the different evangelists handle the common 'deposit' of traditional material which formed the raw material of their gospels we may be able to form an impression of each of their aims, and the communities for which they wrote.

Group Work

Mark's gospel

Small groups

1. Discuss your responses to Task 1 of the preparatory work:
 - What were your impressions of Mark's gospel?
 - What sort of character is the Jesus presented in Mark's gospel?
 - Do you think Mark meant to end his gospel at 16:8? Was it a good idea or not? (You may like to re-read the last three paragraphs of the preparatory reading before answering this.)
 - Agree together on a brief description of Mark's gospel
 - From your readings, what do you think might have been Mark's aims in writing his gospel?

Full group

- Small groups*
2. Feed back your responses, comparing notes on any differences between the groups.
 3. In the gospels, different stories are often linked together. Mark has a distinctive way of interweaving two stories (a technique known as a ‘Marcan sandwich’!) – rather like in a soap opera, where groups of characters appear in alternate scenes. Read Mark 5:21–43, and answer the following questions:
 - Why might Mark have woven these stories together?
 - As readers, do we learn more from them being intertwined than we would have learned from them as completely separate stories? If so, how does each throw light on the other?

Readers and participants

Group leader: divide the group into five sub-groups for Task 4:

- 1 *Jesus*
- 2 *The crowd*
- 3 *The invalid*
- 4 *The four friends*
- 5 *The scribes.*

- Small groups*
4. In the groups named above, read, slowly and thoughtfully, Mark 2:1–12. Try to imagine the scene from the point of view of the person/people you have been allocated. Imagine the heat, smells, feelings, thoughts, what you might have expected, what you might have thought or felt afterwards. Together with the other people in the same role, discuss the part you are playing.
- Full group*
5. Together, share, group by group, the insights you have gained into this story through the parts you have played.

Reading to Follow Up the Session

Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, Oxford University Press.

A serious and well-written book giving views and insights into the gospels and Jesus of Nazareth – and the relationship between the two.

Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001

A straightforward section by section companion to the gospel.

Morna Hooker, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St Mark*, A & C Black.

An excellent and fairly scholarly commentary, warmly recommended for the more serious reader.

Session 6

Luke's Two-Part Story

Aims

- To discover more about the focus and aims of Luke's gospel;
- To consider the Acts of the Apostles as volume 2 of Luke's work;
- To think about how Luke's vision of Jesus and the early Church might help us today.

Preparing for the Session

1. Read carefully the following accounts of the story of Jesus' anointing:

- Matthew 26:6–13
- Luke 7:36–50.

Make notes on these questions:

- What seems to be the significance of the anointing,
 - (a) according to Matthew?
 - (b) according to Luke?
- How do you think the differences you have noted might reflect the focus, or purpose, of each evangelist in writing his gospel?

2. Read the following passages:

- Luke 3:2–17
- Luke 24:44–53
- Acts 1:1–14

Answer these questions on the passages:

- How well do you think the passage in Acts, in which Luke summarises 'the story so far', actually reflect the baptism and ascension accounts in his gospel?
- What parts of the gospel story would you include if you had to write a short summary to introduce the book of Acts?
- Read Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:14–36. What other aspects of the Jesus story does Luke record here?

- Taken together, do you think these two passages from the early part of Acts give a good summary of the gospel message? Is there anything else you would add, or anything that's included and which you would leave out?

3. Read 'A Two-Volume Blockbuster'.

A Two-Volume Blockbuster

It's hard to think of Luke and Acts as two parts of the same project, because in our Bibles they're separated by John's gospel. But the evidence is strong: they're addressed to the same person (Theophilus – a Greek name meaning 'lover of God', which may either refer to an individual or be used to mean all Christians), and their style and language are identical. They are the only New Testament books to be written by a Gentile; many believe their author to have been Luke, the doctor who accompanied Paul on some of his travels.

Luke's aims

Luke is the only gospel writer who starts his story by defining his aims, which are: 'to write an orderly account . . . so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed' (Luke 1:3–4). He is also the only one to give us his credentials: he doesn't claim to have been a first-hand witness of Jesus' life and teachings, but instead to have heard his story from eye-witnesses and to have investigated everything carefully before writing it down (Luke 1:1–3).

Luke sees a continuity between three ages: the age of preparation (the Old Testament), the age of salvation (the time of Jesus) and the age of fulfilment (the era of the early Church). Luke certainly shows Jesus fulfilling Old Testament hope, as does Matthew's gospel – and there are also subtle links between Old Testament stories and events in Luke/Acts. For example, Abraham and Sarah, and their longing for a child, is echoed in the story of Zechariah, Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist; and the Spirit, active in creation, is also shown at Jesus' baptism, at Pentecost and as an active force in the creation and spread of the Church.

At the same time, Jesus stands at the centre and focus of history, and is portrayed by Luke as the compassionate Saviour. Throughout Luke's account, Jesus is shown as caring for the poor, the outcast and needy – and even in the passion story, Jesus shows compassion towards the spectators ('Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me but weep for yourselves'), towards his killers ('Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing') and towards those who die with him ('Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise'). Women feature more strongly in Luke than in the other gospels – and in both Luke and Acts, the writer emphasises that the message of Jesus' life and teaching is for everyone.

Every great event in Luke's gospel is prefaced by prayer, and emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit. Luke apparently equates the

Spirit with God (Acts 5:3–4) – but his account in both the gospel and Acts is much more about what the Spirit *does* than who the Spirit *is*:

- the Spirit **empowers** – spectacularly shown on the day of Pentecost, to fulfil Jesus' promise (Acts 1:8);
- the Spirit **guides** the mission of the early Church, filling and inspiring leaders, and directing their journeys (e.g. Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian, Acts 8:26–40).

In Luke's gospel, the road to Jerusalem is an important theme – from his birth, Jesus is linked with Jerusalem in a special way, because it is here that he is to suffer and die, winning salvation for humankind. Acts, which opens with the frightened disciples in Jerusalem, is also the story of a journey (or a series of voyages), as the Christian road branches out from Jerusalem to 'the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

We shall now look briefly first at Luke's gospel, then at the book of Acts.

1 Luke's gospel

The structure of Luke's gospel can be simply outlined:

- 1:1–4, Introduction.
- 1:5–2:52, Birth and infancy stories (see 'Beginnings', the reading at the end of Session 5, for more on this).
- 3:1–4:13, John the Baptist – John builds up expectations about, as well as preparing the ground for, Jesus.
- 4:14–9:50, Jesus' Galilean ministry – tracing Jesus' ministry from Nazareth to Capernaum, the starting point of Jesus' 'exodus' to the Father which 'ends' in Jerusalem.
- 9:51–19:27, Travel account – Jesus moves without distraction towards Jerusalem, instructing crowds of people, especially his disciples.
- 19:28–21:38, Jerusalem ministry – Jesus' interlude of teaching and ministry around the temple – a prelude to his last days. Luke creates a sense of foreboding as Jesus' time of trial approaches.
- 22:1–23:56a, Passion story – Betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion: all form the climax of Jesus' story.
- 23:56b–24:53, Resurrection story – from the discovery of the empty tomb, to Jesus' appearances on the road to Emmaus and in Jerusalem, and his commissioning of the disciples.

The Jesus manifesto

Luke orders his material elegantly so that it's easy for us to understand what he is getting at. In Luke, Jesus' ministry starts, before he has called any disciples or (as far as we know) performed any miracles, with the announcement of his manifesto (Luke 4:16–30). In the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, and claims to be the fulfilment of that prophecy:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

His listeners can cope with that; what they can’t accept, though, is that they, the Jewish people, will reject him, and that like Elijah and Elisha, his ministry will be received by Gentiles.

We already know, from Jesus’ birth and baptism stories, that the Holy Spirit is indeed upon him. Now Jesus begins to put into practice the rest of his manifesto: he travels throughout Galilee preaching good news – and it is the poor, the humble, the outcasts, the outsiders, who respond. His claim that he will release captives and free the oppressed is fulfilled as he heals people, exorcises spirits, and heals a crippled woman who has been bound by Satan. When John sends from prison to ask if Jesus is indeed ‘the one who is to come’, Jesus replies by saying: ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are brought to life, the poor have good news brought to them’ (7:22). John is left to draw his own conclusions about who Jesus really is – though Luke has left his readers in no doubt at all.

Poverty and riches are a theme of Luke’s gospel, in which, as well as showing a bias to the poor, Jesus shows negative attitudes to the rich – for example, in the parable of the rich fool (12:16–21), or the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31). Luke also emphasises that the disciples had given up *everything* to follow Jesus (5:11) – compared to Mark 1:20, which simply describes them as leaving their homes. And Luke’s Jesus insists that ‘none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions’ (14:33).

Alongside this goes a strong theme of the importance of generosity. Luke is the only evangelist who makes this one of John the Baptist’s themes: ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise’ (3:11). A similar theme, involving generosity of spirit as well as financial generosity, is found in the story of the Good Samaritan (found only in Luke): Jesus’ command to his hearers, ‘Go and *do* likewise’, shows that this is a clear illustration of, and instruction about, direct involvement with those in need.

2 The Acts of the Apostles

Every book of the New Testament tells us something about the early Church. We can deduce, from the gospels and letters, all kinds of interesting background material. But the book of Acts is different: its purpose is to describe the early history of Christianity. Just as Luke’s gospel tells Theophilus the story of the life and teaching of Jesus, so Acts tells how the work of this one person developed into a worldwide Christian movement.

Structure

The book is in two main parts:

- chapters 1–12, which tell the story of the early Christians in Jerusalem and Palestine, with Peter as the leading figure;
- chapters 13–28, which tells the story of Paul the missionary, and which covers the whole Mediterranean world.

These two parts are linked by the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, at whose stoning Paul makes his first appearance (7:58). Acts ends somewhat abruptly with Paul's arrival in Rome. Perhaps this is the climax to Luke's blockbuster: the former persecutor turned missionary arrives in the heart of the empire, and (as the final verse of Acts tells us), 'proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance' (28:31).

Content

(a) Salvation

In both his gospel and in Acts, Luke presents salvation as the heart of the Christian message. Acts tells of numerous individuals or groups who receive salvation as the message is proclaimed to them. The many sermons in Acts, which are preached in missionary situations, conclude with a call to repentance and faith in Christ – which seem to be the twin requirements for salvation. Indeed, Paul cites them as being qualifications for being taken seriously as a Christian missionary: 'I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ' (20:21).

It is easy for us to overlook just how radical was this extension of the Christian message to the non-Jewish world. In Luke's gospel, as we have seen, Luke records Jesus' prophecy that this will happen – but only in one of the last verses of the gospel does Jesus instruct his disciples to extend their mission: 'Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in [the Messiah's] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem' (Luke 24:47). The early missionaries, by following Jesus' instructions, had thereby made a radical breach with the historic faith of Israel. Being a peaceable character, Luke minimises the nature of this breach by explaining:

- that it was the Jews' refusal to believe, their rejection of the gospel, which opened the way to Gentile Christians (Acts 3:23; Acts 7:51–53);
- that this all happened according to prophecy – as confirmed by Jesus when he delivered his manifesto in the synagogue.

Luke opts for seeing it as a smooth development, rather than a stark contrast.

(b) *Communities*

Luke's desire to minimise conflict is also clear in his descriptions of early churches. If we did not have Paul's letters to reveal something of the controversies which reigned, the abuses which crept in, the misunderstandings that prevailed, we would accept Luke's relatively happy and straightforward view of these early Christian communities.

But what we do see in Luke is the development of the Christian church from the first few Christians in Jerusalem, whose way of life is described in Acts 2:44–47, to larger churches who met for Eucharist and teaching, as at Troas (Acts 20:7), with groups of 'elders' leading them, as in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). The earliest Christians seem to have followed the radical gospel teaching about possessions – but later churches do not seem to have followed this economic set-up, nor did members give up their professions. Acts mentions various people of considerable means (e.g. the proconsul Sergius Paulus, 13:7; Lydia, a 'dealer in purple cloth', 16:14; and 'not a few Greek men and women of high standing', 17:12). And there is no indication that this represents a disastrous come-down from the golden days of the first Jerusalem community.

Nevertheless, the gospel theme of generosity is continued in Acts – several people described as being good, with generosity as one of the prime virtues listed (Cornelius, Tabitha, Paul). And, in a book which quotes very few sayings of Jesus, Luke puts into Paul's mouth a teaching not actually recorded in any of the gospels: 'It is more blessed to give than receive' (20:35).

Luke's purposes in Acts

All accounts are selective – what is omitted can be as important as what's included. Just as in his gospel, Luke selected those aspects of the life and teaching of Jesus which meant most to him, so in Acts, he picked out those incidents which illustrated his theme: how Christianity spread from Jerusalem to Rome. This means that there are lots of questions unanswered (such as, what happened to Peter? What did the other apostles do in the early Church?). Indeed, if we only had Luke's account, we wouldn't know that Paul wrote any letters at all.

So what were Luke's reasons for writing Acts? John Drane (in *Introducing the New Testament*) suggests three:

1. To communicate his belief that Christianity is a faith with the potential to change the world. Indeed, through Paul and others it *did* change the world. And its secret of success? The power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the first Christians. Acts may well have been written to encourage Christians to follow, in their own generation, the example set by Paul in his.
2. To emphasise that Christianity could have good relationships with the Roman empire. Again, we see Luke the peacemaker at work here. He encouraged his readers to take a positive attitude towards the empire, emphasising that its officials were often good and upright – and thus implying that a maniac like Nero was the exception not the rule.

3. To write a history of the beginnings of Christianity, because (as he stated at the beginning of Luke's gospel) he wanted an ordered and accurate account to exist. As Drane explains:

As the church became established as a significant institution in the Roman world, it was important for its members to know their origins and history, and Luke was perhaps the first person to set some of it out in a systematic form.

Group Work

Learning about Luke

Small groups

1. Share and discuss your answers on Tasks 1 and 2 of the preparation

Small groups

2. Read Luke 14:12–24, which includes one of Luke's many stories about God's kingdom, and then consider the following questions:
 - If you were preparing a celebration supper (e.g. at harvest time) for your local community, how would you feel if all your guests turned you down?
 - In the parable, who might the host represent? Explore some possibilities (for example, in the light of the setting described in 14:1).
 - Whom might the guests represent? Who might be the first-invited guests? Who might be the second-invited? (compare verses 13 and 21).
 - If Jesus told this parable today, who might the various groups represent in modern-day terms?
 - How does Jesus' teaching through parables compare with Paul's more direct teaching? Does it engage your imagination? Or is it just frustrating?

The widening mission

Small groups

3. Read Acts 10:1–48 and 11:17–18, which tell of the dramatic change wrought in Peter over the acceptance of Gentiles into the Christian Church. Discuss the following questions:
 - What is the real significance of the story of Cornelius –is it about:
 - (a) the place of visions?
 - (b) the importance of prayer?
 - (c) God's reward for good deeds?
 - (d) God's loving acceptance?

- Full group*
- How hard do you think it might have been for Peter to have changed his views and opinions so profoundly? What aspects might he have found particularly difficult?
4. How well do you think your church handles change?
- Does this story in Acts 10 give us any pointers about responding to change, or discerning what is change for the good, in today's world?
 - Do you think that openness to change is part of the Christian life?
- Full group*
5. Feedback your reflections on Tasks 4, 5 and 6. Close the session with prayer about any particular issues that have been raised.

Reading to Follow Up the Session

Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, 2001

A straightforward section by section companion to the gospel

William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke*, St Andrew's Press.

Another volume in the excellent series which can be used for daily Bible study.

Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke, The New Century Bible Commentary*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott.

Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Shook the World: A Fresh Look at the Book of Acts*, IVP, 2002

Session 7

The Same View?

Aims

- To consider the relationship between the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke;
- To try to see each gospel as a separate book, with its own particular background;
- To reflect briefly on the Jewish elements in Matthew's gospel.

Preparing for the Session

1. Read 'Similarities and Differences'.

Similarities and Differences

We all recognise the differences between reading a news story in the *Sun* and reading it in *The Times*. The underlying story is the same – but the 'angle', or treatment, of it is entirely different. Similarly, the main items on Radio 4's news bulletins may be quite different from those on a local commercial radio station – though both are reporting the same day's news.

It's rather similar with Matthew, Mark and Luke. These first three gospels are known as 'Synoptic' (from the Greek words *syn* = together, *opsis* = seeing), because their viewpoints of the Jesus-story are closely related. This gives a tremendous richness and depth to the narrative – we don't have a monochrome single view of Jesus and his ministry, but a colourful and multifaceted account. And added to this, the gospel of John is altogether very different from the other three (as we shall see in Session 8).

Between them, both Matthew and Luke knew, and used, almost all of Mark's gospel – though they varied the way in which they told particular stories:

- because of the personality and agenda of the writer;
- because of the community for which the gospel was being written. We should never forget that, just as Paul's letters were written for specific communities, with their own strengths and weaknesses, so too the gospels were originally aimed at meeting specific needs: the choice of material selected from Jesus' life, words and actions, as well as the slant put on this material, depended on how the

evangelists thought they could best win people in a particular community to faith in Christ.

Because each of the three Synoptic gospels tells roughly the same story in the same order, each repeating large chunks of the material found in the others, the differences between them are highly significant. By looking at these differences, we can therefore discover something about both the authors themselves and their readers.

Gospel sources

Vast amounts of scholarly effort and time have been expended in analysing each of the Synoptic gospels, and their precise relationship to each other. As a result, certain fairly simple conclusions have been drawn, which are now widely accepted:

- Mark was the earliest gospel;
- Matthew and Luke both used Mark as one of their sources;
- Matthew and Luke, which also share a significant amount of material which is *not* found in Mark, also used another text. This is now lost to us, but seems to have been a collection of Jesus' sayings. Scholars call this collection 'Q' (from the German *Quelle*, which means 'source', because it was Germans who first deduced its existence). It seems to have been written in Aramaic, in about AD 50 – significantly earlier than any of the surviving gospels;
- In addition, Matthew and Luke each used material that was unique to them – and which appears nowhere else in the gospels.

Preparation (continued)

2. Read the following passages:

- Matthew 1:1–2:23
- Luke 1:5–2:40

These are stories about the birth of Jesus. Try to approach each one as if it were the first – and only – account you'd ever heard, and make notes on the following questions:

- What do the two accounts have in common?
- What are the main events in each?
- Which characters appear in each?
- What do you think is the emphasis given to the story:
 - (a) in Matthew?
 - (b) in Luke?
- Which account do you personally think is a more enjoyable story – and why?

3. Read 'Beginnings'.

Beginnings

The opening paragraphs of each of the gospels give us a vital set of clues about the rest of the book, says Morna Hooker in her book *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels* (SCM). Nowadays we can get an idea about what a book's about, and whether we might enjoy it, by looking at its cover and title, by reading the publisher's blurb on the back of the book, or looking at the contents list. In the ancient world, the authors in their opening paragraphs conveyed all this information. So what can we learn about each of the gospels from the way in which it begins?

Mark's Gospel

Mark plunges straight in. No birth narratives for him. We've already looked at his opening sentence: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. He backs this up with a quotation from Isaiah (1:2–3) – significant because this is the one of the few places where Mark, the narrator, quotes directly from the Old Testament (unlike Matthew, who quotes it frequently). He uses the quotation to introduce John the Baptist, who steps on to Mark's stage dressed as a Jewish prophet (compare the description of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8).

Mark's account of John is much more brief and to the point than Matthew's or Luke's, each of whom tells us about John's preaching. Instead, Mark's whole focus is on the one who is following John, he whom John proclaims. John describes Jesus as being greater than himself in three respects (1:7):

- **more powerful** – Mark's gospel later shows Jesus' power over demons (e.g. 5:1–13), and has Jesus talking of Satan as a strong man (3:22–27); on the surface, Jesus doesn't appear to be powerful – but Mark's message tells us that he has great power;
- **higher in rank** – John claims his own unworthiness even to unfasten Jesus' sandals. This must have made a great impression, for only slaves took off other people's shoes;
- **offering true baptism** – John's baptism is preparatory, pointing forward to what Jesus is going to do.

Everything John does or says, according to Mark, points to Jesus. John himself is only a signpost. And yet when Jesus comes for baptism, John seems not to recognise him – though the readers are left in no doubt, as the heavenly voice affirms Jesus: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'.

In later scenes in Mark's gospel, all kinds of questions are asked about who Jesus is (for example, 2:7; 3:11; 4:41; 6:2–3; 8:27–30). But we know that, whatever Jesus says and does in the story that is to follow, it will be said and done in the power and with the authority of God.

Then comes Mark's account of the temptations (1:12–13). We tend to weave together all the gospel accounts in our minds, not realising that we may thereby be missing a vital message from a particular evangelist. Mark's account is remarkably short and sparse. It has Old Testament echoes – the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness, when God called them to be his covenant people. Here Jesus, called by God, is in

the wilderness for 40 days. We don't know what his temptations were; Mark doesn't even tell us that Jesus was successful in resisting them – only that Satan confronted him in the wilderness. Mark's reference to 'wild beasts' (traditional symbols of evil) and 'angels' gives the impression of a cosmic battle between the forces of darkness and light, between Satan and Jesus.

Mark's short prologue ends at 1:14. But the scene is set for a book in which Jesus, a figure of authority and spiritual power, is gradually revealed to his disciples and to the world as the Son of God – a 'secret' which we, the readers, have known from the start.

Matthew's Gospel

Matthew's prologue is much longer, covering at least two chapters. He starts by giving us Jesus' family tree, showing his royal pedigree from King David, and his ultimate descent from the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To today's readers, this may seem heavy-going – but even in this apparently dull list there are surprises. Matthew is tracing legal descent, usually mentions only the men – with five exceptions: Mary (he could hardly miss her out!), Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. There's no mention of the Old Testament matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah) – but only of these women, each of whom was somewhat scandalous. Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced her father-in-law; Rahab was a prostitute; Ruth was a non-Jew, who made sexual advances to Boaz, risking scandal; and Bathsheba committed adultery with David. Mary, of course, is about to be found to be pregnant before her marriage to Joseph. It seems that Matthew might be silencing any doubts about Mary's position by pointing to the way in which God has, in the past, chosen to work through and with women who were, to human eyes, morally suspect. And perhaps he also wants to bring Jesus' ancestry down to earth, as it were – God had not chosen impeccable forebears for his son, but a flawed and mixed human family background.

Matthew's 'story' starts in 1:18, with the miraculous conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. As in Mark, we, the reader, are told what is going on: Mary's pregnancy is not a scandal, but a divine act, confirmed by an angel (who appears not to Mary, but to Joseph).

Matthew's account in chapter 2 raises many historical questions: Who were the Magi? What was the star? Why did it mistakenly go first to Jerusalem? But these are not the best questions to be asking. We must instead keep in mind that Matthew is an evangelist – his writings aim to tell his readers something about Jesus. And chapter 2 tells us first and foremost that everything that happened in connection with Jesus' birth is the fulfilment of Scripture (1:23; 2:6; 2:15; 2:18), and that means that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's purpose.

There are also parallels with the Old Testament – especially between the stories of Jesus and baby Moses (in Exodus 1 we learned that pharaoh wanted to kill all Hebrew babies), and God communicated with Moses' father in a dream. Why has Matthew given us these parallels? Perhaps because he wants to represent Jesus not just as a son of David, but also as a new Moses to save his people from slavery. These echoes recur with the Sermon on the Mount – the adaptation of Moses

on Sinai to the Jesus story. But Jesus is greater than Moses – Matthew shows us a man who truly knows and teaches the will of God.

In Matthew's prologue, we find many ideas that are taken up throughout the gospel: Jesus as king (he dies as 'King of the Jews'); Jesus as God's Son; Jesus as an object of worship offered by foreigners; Jesus as teacher and giver of a new 'law'; Jesus as persecuted by worldly authorities. And the end of Matthew's gospel is a new beginning, as the disciples are sent out to proclaim the gospel to the whole world.

Luke's Gospel

The similarities between the first three gospels are striking, as we have seen. But their prologues are dramatically different, each containing the author's own plan and priorities in writing. Luke could be said to have several introductions – we shall be considering here the first two chapters.

Luke's introductory verses (1:1–4) begin in the style of a history-book of the time, with a dedication (to 'most excellent Theophilus'), and a claim for the orderliness and authenticity of what is to follow. His aim is clear: 'So that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed'.

Like Matthew, Luke starts with a birth story; like Mark, Luke starts with John the Baptist. The great difference is that he starts with the birth (not the ministry) of John (not Jesus). Luke's Old Testament references are more subtly woven into his plot than those in Mark and Matthew – nevertheless, he is keen to stress the continuities of old and new covenants, proclaiming Jesus as 'Son of David' (1:32–33; 1:69; 2:11), whose arrival would fulfil God's promise to Abraham (1:72–75).

In Luke, we have two annunciations: one to the sceptical Zechariah, who is struck dumb for his lack of faith; one to Mary. Luke's story is constructed so that, from the very start, even before their births, we see that John was Jesus' forerunner. This is followed by the story of the two births. After John's birth, Zechariah prophesies not about his own son but about the one who is to come, who will 'give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins' (1:77) – and his prophecy moves the story onwards to the birth of that very one.

One of Luke's concerns throughout his gospel is that Jesus and his message bring those who are on the edge, marginalised, ignored, into the very centre. His prologue portrays two women, one marginalised for being barren, one for being pregnant and unmarried; Mary's hymn (1:46–55) celebrates God's upturning of power and prestige; the angels announce the Messiah's birth not to the wise and status-laden, but to shepherds – a group of people treated with contempt by Jews of the time. And the child, born on a journey, with only a manger as accommodation, will become a man whose whole ministry takes the form of a journey, and who has nowhere to lay his head. The poverty and humility of the birth scene reflects a central theme of Luke.

Luke also makes Jesus' identity clear: in the annunciation to Mary, in Zechariah's hymn, in the message given to the shepherds, the reader is left in no doubt as to who this baby is: the Messiah, son of David, the Lord, the Saviour, the Son of God, who will bring in God's upside-down kingdom where salvation comes to the humble and weak, and

judgement to the arrogant. Luke is also anxious to let us know that Jesus birth included all the rites and procedures demanded by the Jewish Law (2:24–49). Morna Hooker thinks that this is an important part of Luke's whole portrayal of Jesus, as she explains:

One of the intriguing differences between Mark's story and Luke's comes in the account of the crucifixion. In Mark, at the moment of Jesus' death, the centurion declares 'This was the Son of God': Mark . . . intends us to understand those words as a declaration of faith. In Luke, however, the centurion says, 'Certainly this man was innocent'. How banal! Instead of words that express the greatest truth about Jesus, we have a statement that he was innocent. But for Luke, Jesus' innocence is very important . . . Here, at the very beginning of his life, we see how everything was done according to the Law. There is no foundation for the accusation that Jesus was a lawbreaker.

Luke's prologue describes the visit to the temple, when the Holy Spirit once again reveals the uniqueness of this baby. So far, the heavenly messengers have told us that Jesus will bring salvation to Abraham's descendants; now we learn that his coming is also 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (2:32) – a theme which is taken up in Acts, the second volume of Luke's story.

The last story of Luke's prologue is the only account we have of Jesus between his birth and his ministry. Once again, it takes place in Jerusalem, at the temple. Perhaps this Passover visit, this determination of Jesus' to be in Jerusalem, and at the temple, looks forward to the last week of his life; certainly, the temple is shown, in Acts, as playing an important part in the lives of the first Christian disciples. Luke, though concerned to show how God's message will be brought to all peoples, suggests this will be the fulfilment of the Israelites' mission, not its end.

Again, the theme of the Holy Spirit – of God actively working in the world – is strong in these first two chapters, a theme which is not spelled out in the rest of the gospel, but which comes to great prominence in Acts, where Luke constantly reminds us that what is taking place in the life of the church is the work of the Spirit.

John's Gospel

The prologue to John's gospel (1:1–18) must be, along with Psalm 23, among the best-known and best-loved parts of the Bible. It makes it plain instantly that this is a very different kind of book from the other three gospels. Mark has offered us a few crisp, dramatic scenes; Matthew and Luke have given us longer stories. John, though, offers undiluted theology in poetic form.

Yet in many ways, John is telling us very similar information. All four start with references to the Old Testament, with John's opening words echoing those of Genesis. All indicate (in very different ways) that Jesus' coming involves struggle and even death (Mark's temptations, Matthew's massacre of the innocents, Luke's prophecy by Simeon, John's cosmic battle between light and darkness). All feature the forerunner, John the Baptist – less as a person in his own right; more as a human signpost to Jesus.

In his first five verses, John links the creation with the continuing work of God in the world – the light shining in the darkness. One of John's themes is light and darkness, and his words of hope – that the darkness has not overcome the light (1:5) – are triumphantly fulfilled in the cross. Yet Jesus himself is not mentioned by name until verse 17; instead, John the evangelist paints a picture on a huge canvas – the story of Jesus is part of a story which started with creation, and which continues even today. From the very beginning of time, the light has shone in darkness, and the darkness has tried to extinguish it. Yet the light shines on through those who, by believing in the true light, become children of God.

And just as Matthew suggested parallels between Moses and Jesus, so too does John (1:17). But according to John, Jesus does not bring to humankind a second-hand report, as did Moses, of what God has said to him. Instead, he is the very embodiment of the Word and the glory of God. And this is a vital theme in John – for when John, in his gospel, speaks about Jesus or God being glorified, he is usually referring to Jesus' death:

For the cross is the supreme revelation of the nature of God: the supreme revelation of his love, and of his purpose to save the world. And because God's nature is revealed in the cross, it is by the cross that he is glorified. Although Jesus reveals God's glory throughout his ministry, he does so above all in his death.

(Hooker, page 82)

John's prologue indicates the character of Jesus as portrayed by John in his gospel: he is self-proclaiming (all the 'I am . . .' sayings are found in John); he is in control – his last words are a cry of triumph, 'It is accomplished!' (19:30). It is in the cross above all that we see Jesus as truly embodying grace and truth.

(The ideas in this reading are taken from Morna Hooker, *Beginnings: Keys that open the Gospels*, SCM.)

Group Work

Matthew's Gospel

Small groups 1. Read the following passages from the Sermon on the Mount:

- Matthew 5:1–24
- Matthew 5:38–6:18
- Matthew 7:1–11

Matthew is the gospel which owes most to the Jewish heritage, quoting frequently from the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew urges his readers, the followers of Jesus, to be even more righteous than the most law-abiding members of the Jewish community from which they have broken away.

- What do these passages say about 'righteousness'?
- What do they tell us about the Christian response to the traditional Jewish religious practices of giving alms, prayer and fasting?
- What other Bible story tells of guidance for living given to God's people from a mountain? Are there any parallels with these passages?

Comparing the gospels

Small groups 2. Read the beginnings of the gospels of Mark and of John:

- In the light of the reading called 'Beginnings', how do their accounts of the beginning of the Jesus-story differ from those in Matthew and Luke?
- What (if anything) might these differences tell us about:
 - (a) the author of each gospel?
 - (b) the first readers of each gospel?
 - (c) what each of the authors is telling us about Jesus?

Small groups 3. Read the three accounts of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand, printed side by side on the next page for easy comparison. Make notes on:

- the similarities
- the differences
- what (if anything) you think the differences might tell us about:
 - (a) the author?
 - (b) the first readers?
 - (c) the character of Jesus, according to this particular gospel?

Mark 3:1–6	Matthew 12:9–14	Luke 6:6–11
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<p>Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward'. Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand'. He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.</p>	<p>He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, 'Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?' so that they might accuse him. He said to them, 'Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.' Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand'. He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.</p>	<p>On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come and stand here'. He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?' After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand'. He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.</p>
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Full group

4. Discuss your findings and reflections from Tasks 2 and 3.

Reading to Follow Up the Session

Richard Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus*, SPCK 1994

A lively and readable overview, highlighting the different portraits of Jesus in each of the gospels.

Morna Hooker, *Beginnings: Keys That Open the Gospels*, SCM, 1997

J P Meier, *The Vision of Matthew: Christ, Church and Morality in the First Gospel*, Alban.

B F Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, SCM.

E P Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, Penguin.

Session 8

According To John

Aims

- To explore further the relationship between the three Synoptic gospels and John;
- To learn about the background to John's writing;
- To consider John's portrayal of Jesus.

Preparing for the Session

1. Read the four accounts of Jesus' baptism:

- Matthew 3:13-17
- Mark 1:9-11
- Luke 3:21-22
- John 1:19-36

Make notes on:

- What are the main similarities?
- What are the main differences?
- In what ways do you think John's account is different from the other three?
- What (if anything) can you deduce from the differences in John about the writer's aims or priorities?

2. Read 'John – A Different Kind of Gospel'.

John – a Different Kind of Gospel

From your work and reading on Session 5, you are already aware of one significant difference between John's gospel and the other three – it opens not with a story, but with a poetic and theological celebration, that the Word, who was with God and part of God from the beginning, 'became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory' (1:14). John's readers are in no doubt, from the very start of his gospel, who Jesus is and why he lived - to bring light into darkness (1:9) and to make God known (1:18).

The differences between John and the Synoptic gospels have never been doubted. But the understanding of the reasons for those differences has varied greatly over the last 50 years. Until recently, John was thought to date from much later than the others (from perhaps around AD 120), and was seen as a sort of extended sermon rather than having any direct relationship to the life and teachings of Jesus. The Synoptic gospels (it was thought) revealed 'factual' stories about Jesus, whereas John's gospel was a 'theological interpretation using some of the stories which the writer had learned through reading Matthew, Mark or Luke.

Nowadays, however, the view of John is very different. It is now widely thought that John was written in about AD 90, and that the writer, far from copying stories from the Synoptics and using them for his own ends, had access to different first-hand reports of the incidents recounted in the Synoptics. This is born out by:

- John's use of different details or emphases in the stories that he shares with one or more of the Synoptics;
- John's use of a number of different stories, which don't appear in the other gospels (e.g. the woman at the well, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, Jesus' post-resurrection meeting with Mary Magdalene).

So John wasn't 'just' a theologian dealing in ideas: he also told stories. And Matthew; Mark and Luke weren't 'just'; storytellers - as we have already seen, the ways in which they told their stories gives us profound insight into their theologies (the ways in which they understood and interpreted God). John Drane sums up current thinking thus:

'It is now coming to be realised that John's gospel is a source in its own right. The information it contains is independent of that in the Synoptic gospels, but at many crucial points, John complements the other three'

(Introducing the New Testament, p.191).

The Background to John

Who was John?

The gospel of John shows the great value of blending different traditions to create a new, unique revelation - and makes us wonder about the writer's identity. Until relatively recently, scholars have seen him as the product of a Greek background and thought. This is especially obvious in the prologue where the Greek philosophical concept of '*logos*', the Word, is used to explain the incarnation. But there is increasing realisation that John also has strong Jewish roots. Indeed, if we remove the prologue from the gospel, there is little in the rest of it that implies a Greek background. Instead there are many Jewish features:

- John uses the great Jewish festivals as a time-framework for Jesus' ministry;
- John states his purpose for writing a very Jewish form: 'that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God' (20:31);

- John uses the Greek language in a way which shows a close connection with Aramaic (e.g. in using words such as *Cephas* or *Rabboni*) - Aramaic being the colloquial form of Hebrew which Jews had been using for several hundred years. More significantly, there are several places in which the Greek of the gospel text follows the rules of Aramaic grammar or Hebrew poetry. Aramaic may well have been the author's native language.

In addition, recent archaeological excavations in Jerusalem have shown that John's descriptions of places - for example of Bethesda Pool (5:2-3), or 'The Stone Pavement' where Jesus met Pilate (19:13) - are accurate, based on an intimate knowledge of the city at the time of Jesus.

The writer

The authorship of John is disputed, even to the extent that many writers call it 'the Fourth Gospel', and treat it as being anonymous. Some, though, think that it was written by John the Son of Zebedee, whom they identify as 'the beloved disciple' (or in other translations, 'the disciple Jesus loved') mentioned several times in the gospel - for example, he was the one closest to Jesus at the Last Supper (13:23); and he was one of those standing at the foot of Jesus' cross (19:26). Others think that it was written by the same John who wrote Revelation - or it has even been suggested that Lazarus of Bethany was the author.

There are certainly similarities of content between the gospel of John and the letters of John - though many scholars think that this is probably because they were written to the same community rather than because they were written by the same person.

When was John written?

Clearly, questions of authorship and date are closely linked. It was probably written some time between AD 70 and 100 - certainly no later. One theory suggests that there were two editions of John: the first was an eye-witness account of Jesus' life and deeds, written in Palestine to demonstrate that 'Jesus is the Messiah': the original author may have been writing for sectarian Jews who had been influenced by ideas like those of the Qumran community. Then, when the same teaching was seen to be relevant to people elsewhere in the Roman empire, a second author - possibly the author of John's letters - revised the original gospel, and what we have today is this edited version. The evidence seems to support this:

- Both the beginning and ending of the gospel seem stylistically different from the rest. We have already mentioned the Greek style of the prologue, whose pattern is poetic and which contains certain words not found elsewhere in the gospel. Similarly, chapter 21 seems to have been added on, with the last two verses of chapter 20 forming a natural ending.
- There are a few examples of breaks and inconsistencies in the text - for example, after the Last Supper, Jesus talks to his disciples about God, and about the Holy Spirit, and then says, 'Rise, let us be on our way' (14:31). He then plunges into more teaching - about his relationship with God and with his disciples, and more on the

Holy Spirit - and there are three more chapters before we read, 'After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples' (18:1). Perhaps the material we now call chapters 15, 16 and 17 was added for the second edition.

For whom was John's gospel written?

Much has been written on what is called 'the Johannine community'. Traditionally it has been linked with a community of Christians at Ephesus. John's gospel was certainly written for those who had no first-hand knowledge of Jesus - as indicated, for example, in Jesus' prayer ('I ask not only on behalf of these [i.e. the apostles], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word', 17:20), and in Jesus' response to Thomas ('Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe', 20:29).

As we have seen, Luke wrote two books to tell first the story of the life of Jesus and then about the spread of belief in him. John seems to have combined both these into one in his gospel, which is more clearly written for a church than any of the other gospels. He accepts the existence of a community whose aim is to 'abide in Jesus'. His key images for the church - the shepherd's flock (10:1-29) and the vine (15:1-11) - both emphasise the believer's relationship to Jesus.

There are various references in John which might offer information about his first readers:

- John's terminology is surprising in that he refers to the religious enemies of Jesus simply as the 'Jews' - despite the fact that Jesus and his first disciples were also Jewish. Evidently he was writing after the Christian Church had broken with Judaism - and to a community which included many non-Jews.
- John tells of Jesus' mission to the Samaritans, in his story of the woman at the well. She is the one to whom Jesus first reveals his messianic identity (4:25-26), and through her 'many Samaritans believed in him' (4:39-42). It has been suggested that John's community contained a good number of Samaritans.
- John places women in key roles - which again may have reflected an equality in the community to which he was writing. The Samaritan woman is the first to receive Jesus' self-revelation; it is Martha who confesses that Jesus is the Messiah (11:27) - a role given to Peter elsewhere (Matthew 16:16); Mary Magdalene is the first to meet the risen Lord, and is the apostle to the apostles (20:17-18).

The content of John

John is a complex gospel with many themes, images and concepts interwoven throughout it. Here is a brief description of some of John's main themes:

1 *Salvation*

John's overriding theme is salvation, the meaning of which he expresses in the words 'life' or 'eternal life'. Jesus is the one who gives this life, which is available to those who believe in him.

2 *Relationship*

John clearly teaches that Jesus' followers can have a relationship with him, even though he is not physically present. And through Jesus, they can have a relationship with the Father (see especially 14:18-24). Again, this relationship comes through belief in (literally 'into') Jesus - a phrase used time and again throughout the gospel.

3 *Incarnation*

John teaches more clearly than the other gospels the belief that Jesus was one with God, existing from the beginning of all things, and truly human. Jesus, in John's gospel, shocks his hearers by claiming equality, and intimacy, with God (e.g. 'The Father and I are one', 10:30; 'You, Father, are in me and I am in you', 17:21). John shows Jesus as fully human in all he does, yet in and through his actions there is the Word of God, declaring their meaning for salvation.

4 *Jesus' death*

Jesus' death is the climax of John's story - and is for John the ultimate proof that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. He makes it very clear that Jesus' death is voluntary - that Jesus could have saved himself by retracting his message. Jesus lays down his life of his own accord, and thus has the power to take it up again - and his willingness to do this is 'the reason the Father loves me' (10:17).

5 *The 'I am....' sayings*

John's gospel is peppered with 'I am. . .' sayings, in which Jesus reveals aspects of his nature:

- 'I am the bread of life' (6:35, 41, 48, 51)
- 'I am the light of the world' (8:12)
- 'I am the gate for the sheep' (10:7, 9)
- 'I am the good shepherd' (10:11, 14)
- 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25)
- 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (14:6)
- 'I am the true vine' (15:1, 5)

The Greek words for 'I am' (*'ego eimi'*) also occur in other places in the gospel where they are translated as 'I am he' (e.g. when Jesus walks on the water in the storm - 6:20). They occur most dramatically at the climax of the Jesus story, when Judas leads the religious police to the garden to arrest Jesus:

Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, 'For whom are you looking?' They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth'. Jesus replied, 'I am he' [literally, 'I am']. (18:4-5)

Here we see again Jesus' control over the situation: he willingly identifies himself and goes with his enemies. But more than that: the phrase 'I am' has many resonances for the Jews, and those with knowledge of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament - look again at Exodus 3:14 if you need a reminder.

6 *The 'signs'*

Instead of presenting the Jesus-story as a series of episodes, John's gospel is an intricate unity. The miracles become seven 'signs', which are selected to help the readers to believe. Each sign is emphasised by extensive reflective material, often a sermon, or 'discourse', by Jesus expanding its meaning, and often linked to an 'I am...' saying. But despite the signs, Jesus is not recognised - people are blind, and prefer the darkness to the light.

7 *The Holy Spirit*

John depicts Jesus' resurrection and withdrawal from earth in a positive light. His followers are not left bereft, but because Jesus has gone, the Holy Spirit, the power of God himself, is given to Christians to enable them to live in fellowship with the exalted Jesus. For example, we read:

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-9)

John also clearly teaches that the Spirit is not some impersonal divine power. The Holy Spirit is personal, precisely because the continuing relationship with Jesus in glory is a personal relationship, so the power of God which he gives to them can be no less personal.

Concluding Thoughts

Our understanding of John's gospel can be increased as we learn more about its background, its stories, its significance. But above all, John's gospel expresses an ardent love for Christ and a deeply sensitive religious spirit which spoke to his probably very varied community of first readers - of Jews, Samaritans and Greeks, men and women:

The eloquence, nobility and persuasiveness of his story have not lessened down the years, for it is still the gospel of John that speaks most tellingly to the simple believer, and also most effectively plumbs the depths of Christian belief and commitment for the highly sophisticated.

(John Marsh, in his introduction to the Pelican Bible Commentary, *Saint John*)

For all people, John's gospel still bears powerful witness that 'Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God', and enables men and women 'through believing to have life in his name' (20:31).

Group Work

John and the Synoptics

Full group

1. Discuss your thoughts and reflections on the accounts of Jesus' baptism in the four gospels - along with any comments which arose from reading 'John - a Different Kind of Gospel'.

Meetings with Jesus

Each group should start with a different passage so that all the passages are covered.

Small groups

2. Read at least one of the following passages carefully:

- John 3:1-21, 19:38-42
- John 4:5-42
- John 9:1-41
- John 11:1-45
- John 20:1-29

Discuss these questions in relation to each passage:

- What effects did this encounter with Jesus have on this person (or these people), according to John's gospel?
- What is Jesus teaching them in his words and actions?
- How (if at all) does their story help us to learn about Jesus or deepen our relationship with him?
- What picture of Jesus does this story give?

Full group

3. Tell other members of the group about your reflections on your particular passage(s). Then discuss the following questions:
 - Did Jesus meet the 'insiders' in his society?
 - If we are carrying on Jesus' mission, who should we be meeting in our parish?
 - How should we be carrying on his ministry?

The Communion

Small groups

4. Read the following passages:

- Luke 22:14-23
- John 6:1-14, 48-58
- John 13:1-16

Then answer the following questions:

- What are the main differences between
 - (a) Luke's account of the Last Supper and John's?
 - (b) Luke's account of the institution of the Eucharist and John's?
- What effect do these differences make to the meaning and implications of:
 - (a) the Eucharist?
 - (b) Jesus' example of humble service?

Full group

5. Share your discussions arising from Tasks 2 and 3.

- Do you think either of these two accounts of the institution of the Eucharist should affect the way in which we celebrate it today? If so, how?

Reading to Follow Up the Session

Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, SPCK, 2002

A straightforward, section by section companion to the gospel.

Barnabas Lindars, *John*, Sheffield Academic Press.

An excellent introduction to the contents and issues arising from John's gospel. Serious, but not lengthy.

William Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel*, Macmillan.

Theologically old-fashioned, but spiritually profound, this book offers personal insights from an ex-archbishop of Canterbury into John's gospel.

Session 9

Revelation and Reflection

Aims

- To learn about Jewish apocalyptic writing;
- To explore aspects of the book of Revelation, and whether it has any relevance today;
- (Optional) To consider briefly some of the later New Testament letters;
- To review our understanding of the Bible in the light of Parts 2 and 3 of the course.

Preparing for the Session

1. Read the following passages:
 - Revelation 3:1–6, 14–22
 - Revelation 12:1–12
2. Read 'Revelation – or obscurity?'

Revelation – or obscurity?

Perhaps no book in the New Testament is less read, and less understood, than Revelation. To us, it seems strange – cosmic forces of good and evil battle behind a thin veneer of 'normal' life.

It's supposed to be a revelation – but it seems to be the opposite!

But to the first Jewish Christians, Revelation would not have been such a bizarre shock. It was an example of a familiar type of writing, called 'apocalyptic' – of which the other main biblical example occurs in the Old Testament book of Daniel. Much apocalyptic writing was produced between about 100 BC and AD 100, at a time when God's people were suffering for their faith, and were asking the question, 'Why?'. Apocalyptists did not follow the main Old Testament tradition of seeing God at work in this world. Instead, they believed that God had made two different worlds – this world and a heavenly one. Visions, dreams and revelations were all connected with this heavenly world, and their stories were full of strange beasts and symbolic numbers. Their writing was not intended to foretell future events, or make predictions in the style of Nostradamus; they were not recording history at all, but giving a powerful imaginative account of God's grand, overarching plan. Such writers intended to show that God would eventually bring about his people's deliverance – if not before, then at the end of time.

James Dunn defines six characteristics of Jewish apocalyptic writings:

1 Anonymous

Writers rarely used their own names, but claimed to be speaking for some famous individual from the past (e.g. Peter or Paul, Moses or Ezra). This presumably gave weight and authenticity to the content.

2 Visions and symbolism

The writer usually received his revelation in visions, sometimes through dreams, and it often included bizarre symbolism and heavenly portents – as, for example, in the vision described in Daniel 7.

3 Past and present

The writer often claimed to be writing at a much earlier date than was the case, presenting historical events which had already happened as if they were allegorical prophecies of the future. They were obviously right – and this gave weight to the author's genuine predictions about the future. For example, many scholars believe that Daniel 11 charts the rise of Alexander the Great, and that it was certainly written after the events which are described with some accuracy.

4 Obscure

It was not always clear to the reader what the dreams and visions meant, or what the numbers symbolised. Some secrecy is intentional (for example, Daniel is instructed to 'keep the vision secret, for it points to days far ahead', 8:26).

5 Crisis literature

Apocalyptic writing was often faith's response to a crisis – a looking to God to intervene where human resources were failing, and the faithful were at risk of being destroyed. The book of Revelation, for example, seems to have been written at least partly as a result of the threat of persecution by the Emperor Domitian, in around AD 95.

6 Ethical exhortations

Such literature usually contained exhortations to the readers to repent, to change, in view of the approaching 'End' and the coming judgement. There were often warnings against wrongdoing, as well as urgings to righteous living. Moral strictness was a regular part of apocalyptic writing.

Apocalyptic thinking in the early Church

Before we dismiss this as a strange and obscure form of writing, it is worth noting that a number of gospel passages are apocalyptic. The message of John the Baptist is highly apocalyptic (Matthew 3:7–12), and

Jesus himself often used some of the ideas and language associated with apocalyptic writing (see, for example, Matthew 24:3–31; Mark 13:28–37; Luke 10:18). The earliest Christians lived in the eager anticipation of Christ's triumphant return to earth, successfully battling against the forces of evil that seemed to be prevailing in this world. And certainly, in the Revelation of John, when the Christian Church was facing a crisis of choice between worshipping the imperial cult or submitting to bloody persecution, apocalyptic literature again came into its own.

Revelation, as a book of Christian apocalyptic writing, brings three extra elements to the Jewish form of writing:

- **It is Christ-centred**, expressing the belief that the exalted Jesus will intervene in future history as he had done in past history – but that next time, his intervention would be of final significance for the whole world.
- **There is an 'already/not yet' tension** – this is evident throughout all the New Testament writings. Future hope is linked to past events; Jesus had brought in God's kingdom – but it was not yet fully victorious, fully realised.
- **It is cautious** – deliberately avoiding speculation about dates and times of Christ's return (the gospels contain a number of warnings from Jesus about being always ready, because God alone knows the dates and times of his return).

Apocalyptic writing was not intended to be a way of escape from reality, but was intended to bring believers to a new sense of responsibility towards the world. It sees history as being orientated towards the future – to apocalyptists, hope is not a vague feeling, or a naive optimism, but is based on the belief that the forces of history are ultimately in God's control, and are driving towards God's goal.

Some people believe that the importance of apocalyptic thought among the earliest Christians indicates that it should continue to have a role today – not in exactly the same form, for each generation must work out what this means in specific terms for themselves. The role of apocalyptic Christianity in each generation is to understand the present in the light of the future, and the future in relation to the present:

The problem of apocalyptic Christianity is now both to *retain* it and *restrain* it: To retain its hope of God's imminent intervention and the enthusiasm it brings, and to restrain it from becoming detailed, too certain of its particular expression, too dependent on a particular fulfilment of that hope. Apocalyptic Christianity is confronted by. . . the problem of retaining hope without letting it get out of hand. Such conflicting currents have been an integral and important part of the broad stream of Christianity from the earliest days till now.

(Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 340)

The structure of Revelation

The first three chapters of Revelation are similar to many other New Testament writings: they contain seven letters to seven churches in the

Roman province of Asia. But they are not real letters, like Paul's – instead, they claim to come from the risen Jesus himself. John says their content was given to him in a vision – just like the rest of the book

Chapters 4 and 5 introduce the main body of apocalyptic material with a vision of heaven. Here, the author sets out the way in which he understands God's workings in history. God is high and exalted, beyond human understanding (as represented by the 24 elders) – and the scroll containing God's revelation to the world can only be opened by the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

The chapters that follow present a series of visions describing how God judges all those forces which are implacably opposed to him. These can be described in a pattern of seven sections of seven (remembering that seven was a specially sacred number to the Jews):

- seven seals (6:1–8:1)
- seven trumpets (8:2–11:19)
- seven visions of the dragon and his kingdom (12:1–13:18)
- seven visions of the Lamb of God and his coming (14:1–20)
- seven bowls of God's anger against evil (15:1–16:21)
- seven visions of the fall of 'Babylon' (17:1–19:10)
- seven visions of the end (19:11–21:4)

The writer has given us an artistic kaleidoscope of images, from different perspectives, of how God will finally overcome the forces of evil.

Interpreting Revelation?

Revelation has an important message for a world in which it is all too easy for individuals to feel helpless against huge organisations, global issues, great powers. Revelation reminds readers that God is in control and the future is in his keeping.

There are many different ways of interpreting the details of the book, though. Here are four:

1 Preterist

'Preterist' describes those who think that Revelation was significant only for those who lived at the time when it was written. It has very little value nowadays.

2 Historicist

'Historicists' see Revelation as an inspired forecast of the whole of human history, setting out symbolically the whole history of Western Europe up to the second coming of Christ. The disadvantages of this position are:

- (a) it would have meant little or nothing to its first readers;
- (b) it excludes people outside Western Europe

- (c) there are so many different historicist interpretations that none really rings true.

3 Futurist

Futurists see the whole of Revelation, apart from the first three chapters, as referring to some future time – ‘the end of the age’. All the events described will immediately precede Christ’s second coming.

4 Idealist

Idealists believe that Revelation does not refer to actual events, either at the time of writing or in the future. Instead, it sets out principles on which God works all through history, in poetic terms.

Perhaps the most important thing is to recognise that Revelation had considerable meaning for its first readers, and that it has lasting value in demonstrating God’s control and sovereignty over history.

3. Do?

Group Work

Revelation today

- Full group* 1. Discuss whether you see yourself as a preterist, a historicist, a futurist or an idealist in the way in which you currently use the book of Revelation.
- Small groups* 2. Read Revelation 6:1–17. Discuss together what, if anything, these images might signify for us today.
- Small groups* 3. Now read Ephesians 6:10–17, and the following quotation:
- [Revelation] is not a book written to titillate or to gratify the curiosity of men anxious to tear aside the veil from the future. It is no book of riddles, although it has often in the past been treated as one. It does indeed draw veils aside and open up a vista of God’s actions and his ways; for it proclaims the kingdom of God, which is here and now and yet is still to come in its fullness, bringing with it the overthrow of all that is against him.
- (W C van Unnik, *The New Testament*)
- Do these passages offer any further insights into your reading of Revelation 6?
 - What are some of the forces today that we are called to battle with?

- Full group*
- If you were writing today about the four destructive horsemen, what would you use each one to symbolise
4. Discuss your ideas and responses to Tasks 2 and 3.

Bible overview

Having now completed both of the biblical units on the Foundations for Ministry course, we will now reflect back over that work.

- Small groups*
5. What have you learned about the New Testament and the Story of Jesus over the course of this unit?
6. How would you summarise the differences in the way the Old and the New Testaments tell the story of the people of God?

- Full group*
7. Discuss together the following questions:
- In the light of your studies, how would you want to change the way in which we use the Bible in church? Consider your answer for:
 - (a) the Old Testament
 - (b) the New Testament.
 - In what ways do you think that the Old and New Testaments are important for the Church today?
 - Are there any parts which you think are irrelevant?

Ending the session

- Full group*
8. Spend some time quietly thanking God for the Bible and what we can learn from it. You may like to close by saying together this collect:
- Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures
to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Reading to Follow Up the Session

A brief and optional account of some of the later epistles is given below for those who are interested. In addition, the following books may prove helpful:

C F D Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, A & C Black.

R E Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, Paulist Press.

James D G Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, SCM.

A comprehensive textbook giving a thorough analysis of the development of early Christianity.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, SCM.

An influential feminist theological reconstruction of the Christian origins, both during the lifetime of Jesus and in the early Church.

Glimpses into Some Later Epistles

It is not possible in this single unit to cover the whole of the New Testament. For those who are interested, here is an optional article on the later epistles, either to read at the end of the unit, or for possible future reference.

Towards the end of the first century, in the period after the writing of the Paul's letters and the four gospels, a number of other Christian writings were composed which were addressed to a wider public than Paul's letters had been. Many of them claim to have been written by apostles, but, on the basis of the evidence found within the writings themselves, many scholars believe they are later: in particular, these letters reveal a much more organised and uniform pattern of faith and tradition than we find in the earlier writings. Many of them seem to have been written against a background of impending persecution (perhaps from the Romans?) and of the threat of heresy from false teachers.

Some scholars tend to treat these writings as later, and thus less important. Others have tried to prove that at least some of them are actually products of the earlier period after all. Certainly they should not be dismissed as merely 'sub-apostolic', for, if nothing else, they are a vital link between the period of the New Testament and the writings of the Church Fathers. Besides, the consensus of opinion in the early Church was that these documents were of sufficient status and importance to be included in the New Testament, and they therefore deserve to be investigated in their own right.

Of these later writings, we have selected three for brief consideration: James, 1 Peter and the letters of John.

James

The letter of James emphasises that religious belief is worthless if it does not affect the way we live. Devotion to God does not end at the church door – it only begins there. James's letter is thus full of practical instructions – and, like Jesus, he uses many vivid illustrations to deliver his message. For example, he compares the tongue to a ship's rudder, and to a spark igniting a forest fire.

James has a number of distinctly Jewish features – for instance, it is the only book in the New Testament in which the gathering of Christians is referred to as a synagogue. The name of Jesus is only mentioned twice, and when he gives examples for his readers to follow, the writer chooses Old Testament figures (e.g. Abraham, Rahab, Job).

Its most famous argument is probably that in chapter 2 dealing with faith and works, in which the writer appears deliberately to challenge Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. For this reason Martin Luther referred to it as 'a right strawy epistle', and wanted to exclude it from the German New Testament!

1 Peter

Like James, 1 Peter contains much ethical instruction, but it is far more concerned with the Christian message of salvation. 1 Peter clearly conveys the message that Gentile Christians are now the true successors to the people of God in Old Testament times. The letter reminds readers that they have responsibilities as well as privileges – the standards for Christian behaviour are different from worldly standards. This is summed up in 3:8: 'Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind' – for in all this they are serving Christ.

Some scholars believe that 1 Peter was compiled from earlier material used at a baptism, with 1:3–4:11 being part of a baptismal liturgy. The writer uses cultured Greek and seems to write against a background of persecution. The recipients of the letter seem surprised by the persecution (4:12) – which indicates that it might have been the beginning of Nero’s attacks on Christians, which began in AD 64 or 65 – otherwise they would surely have come to accept such suffering as the norm.

John’s letters

The three letters of John are usually grouped together, and their close relationship to John’s gospel is widely recognised. The gospel was written to win people to faith in Jesus; the epistles, though, were written to people who were already Christians, who clearly needed to be reassured about their faith: ‘I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have life through his name’ (1 John 5:13). Like James, 1 John stresses that Christian faith must affect the way people behave. True Christians must live as Jesus Christ lived (2:6), and must accept the forgiveness which only Jesus can give.

1 John is the most important of the three letters, taking up a number of themes from the gospel and applying them to the life of the community in a series of meditations. 2 and 3 John are closely related to 1 John in content, though they are quite different types of literature. Both are short, personal letters, one addressed to a church, the other to an individual called Gaius.

-
- What has been most helpful?

What have you learned from studying this unit of the course about:

- the subject?

- yourself?

How might you use what you have learned in your life as a follower of Jesus Christ?

How would you evaluate your contribution to the group?

LEADER'S COMMENTS (optional)

In discussion with the group member, comment briefly on what you have observed of him/her during the past term in terms of learning/understanding, and/or group contributions. Also include (if appropriate) comments on the group member's assignment.

Assignment for Unit 2

You should write an essay on one of the following topics. You should aim to write up to 1000 words, and include sufficient examples from the Bible, and especially the New Testament, to demonstrate extensive reading of it. (You do not need to write out Biblical texts in full, references to passages used will suffice).

What are the main points of continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments?

What are the particular emphases that each of the four evangelists brings to the story of Jesus?

What were the main challenges facing the young churches in the New Testament? What can we learn today from their experience?

Assignments should be submitted to your course tutor.