

Readings

Additional readings

The following list is provided as options for:

- facilitator pre-reading, if desired
- participant reading during the **Short Trails**
- a place where participants can be directed for those who wish to engage with more material following the workshop

Bottcher, Rev Dr R (2003) *The Bible: Word of God?* Lutheran World Federation Tenth Assembly: Winnipeg, Canada. July 2003. Available online
http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/Dts/Thinking-It-Over/DTS-Thinking-02-A5.pdf

Craig, R (2009) *Interpreting Scripture – a Lutheran view of the Bible*. Available online
http://protestantism.suite101.com/article.cfm/interpreting_scripture

ELCA *The Bible*. Available online
<http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/New-or-Returning-to-Church/Dig-Deeper/The-Bible.aspx>

Habel, Rev Dr N (2008) To rule or to serve? *The Lutheran*, October 2008.

LEA (2005) A framework for Lutheran schools, *A Vision for Learners and Learning in Lutheran Schools* Adelaide: LEA.

Scaer, D (1997) *Getting into the story of Concord*. St Louis, Missouri USA: Concordia Publishing House.

Vardy, Dr P & Mills, M (1995) *The puzzle of the Gospels*. London, UK: Fount Publishers.

Wendt, H. (1979) *Crossways! A survey course of the narrative and major themes of the old and new testaments*. Indianapolis, USA: Parish Leadership Seminars Inc.

“Thinking it over...” Issue #2

JULY, 2003

THE BIBLE: WORD OF GOD?

If asked, “Do you believe in the Bible?” I would be inclined to say: no, I do not; at least I would hesitate. Let me explain what I mean.

WALKING ON A TIGHTROPE

We are caught in a quandary: while the Bible is central to our Christian faith, most of us no longer require women to cover their heads when praying in a worship service, although the apostle Paul demanded that this practice be followed (1 Cor 11:2ff.). And hardly anyone will use the instructions for so-called “Holy Wars” as a basis and model for dealing with “enemies” (Deut 20:10ff.).

What does it mean, then, to take the Bible seriously when at the same time we feel an instinctive need to treat particular passages with some reservation?

In which way have you come across this question in your life and in your church?

GOD IN HISTORY: THE BIBLE AS WITNESS

In the course of my own life as a Christian and theologian I have come to realize that human traditions, concepts and institutions emerge out of a sometimes long and complex history and are subject to and shaped by economic, political and other conditions. Religions and their holy scriptures are no exception to this. The Bible too is the result of a distinct human history.

If this is by and large correct, it becomes clear that in terms of finding guidance with regard to problems we face we cannot expect to draw results from the Bible that will remain valid universally and for all times. Rather, we are bound to reexamine our results ever anew in light of new experiences and new insights.

Our search for what it means to live as Christians today shares the “historicity” of human existence. At the same time this search boldly upholds the conviction of faith, based on experience of many generations, that there is indeed an ultimate point of reference—produced not by ourselves or by fellow-humans, but by the One the Bible calls the God of Israel, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, whom the universal church professes as the Triune God. And it is this God who has established his lasting covenant with his people Israel, who has disclosed himself in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, who has called all the people on

earth in the power of his Spirit—who is borne witness to in the Bible. In this sense I would say that the Bible is not itself the Word of God, but it is the human and historical witness to the Word that God has spoken in disclosing himself in history with Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth in the power of the Spirit. Conversely, it is not exclusively but decisively through the Bible that we gain access to God's love, faithfulness, saving work, promise and commandment, by means of which God gives himself to us, grabs hold of us, calls us to faith, hope and obedience in the power of his Spirit.

It is for these reasons that the Bible is so central to our faith. It is only the Bible which assures us that this God is a gracious God who remains faithful to Israel and to the church and to humankind, despite the presence of sin. God's never failing faithfulness has been exercised and assured in the cross of Jesus. It is this "historical connection" with God's own dealing with us, as well as the fact that the message based on this book bearing witness to that history, has led innumerable generations to faith, hope and obedience in the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the principal reason for appreciating the Bible over any other book.

It might be asked how this understanding is in line with our Lutheran tradition.

Martin Luther kept praising the Bible as the living voice of the liberating gospel, the source of our comfort and joy. But at the same time he dared to distinguish the value of its various books with breathtaking boldness and frankness, even raising the question if some of them were rightly part of the Bible. Evidently he had an acute sense of its humanness and of the fact that some of these books are closer to the Bible's christological center, thus weightier, than others.

How do you understand the relation between the book of the Bible and God's saving and revealing work?

GOING ASTRAY ...

If this is a responsible approach to dealing with the Bible, it calls into question two all too common approaches:

The first approach negates the distinction between the history of God's self-revelation on the one hand, and on the other hand how this is witnessed to in the Bible, which has been "produced" by human beings under specific identifiable historical conditions. It is our faith conviction that this human production was permeated and embraced by the work of God's Spirit. If we ignore this basic distinction we tend to make absolute biblical passages which were bound to certain historical circumstances and are no longer relevant (1 Cor 11:2ff.) or are incompatible with the core of Christian faith (see e.g., Deut 20:10ff.).

The second questionable approach to the Bible is to declare this age-old book to be outdated. We find this notion particularly among secularized skeptics, but also among some fellow-Christians. When we came across unwieldy, less palatable

biblical texts, time and again some of my students would suggest: "Let's at least at this point, forget about the Bible; let us turn to more topical resources." Here I kept disagreeing, because this way of dealing with the Bible, now from the opposite side, again disregards the witnessing function of this book. It comes down to relinquishing eternal truth because it is contained "in jars of clay" (2 Cor 4:7).

Have you come across such tendencies in your community, in your church, in the development of your own faith? People might even have good reasons to think that way. Could you imagine which ones?

CONSEQUENCES: WALKING ON A TIGHTROPE AS JOY AND BURDEN

An appreciation of the Bible in the positive sense set forth above has consequences:

It helps us to discover our commonalities and differences with the Bible and its agents/ subjects in light of our different contexts: as we are struggling with life in hope and fear, in joy and frustration under particular historical and societal conditions, be it in Tanzania, in India or in Canada—so did they. This provides for similarities between us and them, as well for specific differences. This insight might be relevant, for example in viewing liberation struggles in light of Israel's Exodus and Jesus' resurrection.

It helps us to understand why the Bible relates to a specific question in a particular way: For example Paul and James, evidently presented the issue of justification and good works in seemingly opposing ways because they had to face up to much different challenges. This prompted them to set forth entirely differing emphases in order to struggle adequately with the same problem: being saved by God's grace and yet called to live a life in response to that grace.

It helps us to relate the gospel creatively (not arbitrarily!) to our own challenges and concerns along this line: "What does it have to say to us today, for example regarding the relation between men and women, in light of what it had to say about this under conditions of Greco-Roman cultures?" Wilfried Joest, a German scholar, aptly captured this hermeneutical task in the following way: The challenge for us today in communicating the message of the Bible is to preach the same gospel in a different way without preaching a different gospel (see W. Joest, *Fundamentaltheologie*, Kohlhammer-Verlag: Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln/Mainz, 1974, p. 183).

This provides a basis for sharing our experiences with and perceptions of the biblically testified gospel from our different contexts, enabling us to enrich, challenge and critique each other in our respective understandings of the gospel and its meaning

for our lives. This is an opportunity to live out what it means to be a communion of churches.

This also empowers us to become aware that biblical texts can be misused ideologically, for example in order to legitimize wars in the name of fighting what we deem to be evil. We need to be sensitive to our own tendencies to harnessing biblical texts for our own purposes.

This (self-)critical understanding of the Bible, though, comes with a cost:

It prevents us from expecting clear-cut answers from these texts, which can be mechanically applied, because they speak to us out of a world that was in many ways different from our present one. But that requires continual rereading of the Bible in light of new questions and challenges and sharing our "re-search"-attempts within the communion of sisters and brothers. In addition, that requires being attentive to insights, that, for example, secular sciences provide with regard to the dynamics of human sexuality and other anthropological insights that are at our disposal today, but that Paul was totally unaware of, when he pronounced indiscriminately his devastating verdict on any sort of homosexuality in Romans 1. Under historical and societal conditions different from the ones prevailing at biblical times, and in light of new insights (i.e., into the dynamics of human sexuality), we may sometimes need to be critical of what a particular scriptural passage says (e.g., Lev 20:13) in order to concur with the core of the gospel. Conversely, ignoring these differences and sticking with the wording of a particular passage might violate the core and spirit of the gospel!

This does not mean setting ourselves over against the Bible. Neither does it mean manipulating biblical texts at will. But it does mean that we take seriously the fact that we are on our way (Heb 13:14). Moving along we are encouraged and bound to turn ever anew to the Bible for orientation for our lives, confident that through this human book we hear the voice of the Triune God, and that this voice will guide us into all truth (Jn 16:3). It is a truth that will never be at our disposal, which God will give us in his own freedom.

What are your reactions to this approach? Frustration, fear, freedom, new hope?

What would you add or address differently?

REV. DR REINHARD BÖTTCHER

The Lutheran World Federation
Department for Theology and Studies
150 route de Ferney, (P.O. Box 2100),
CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
Tel. +41/22-791 61 94 Fax +41/22-791 66 30
E-mail: reb@lutheranworld.org Web site: www.lutheranworld.org

LWF Youth Assembly
Geneva, 2003
2 July 2003



Interpreting Scripture A Lutheran View of the Bible



Lutherans believe that the Bible is the inspired, authoritative Word of God. But what exactly does this mean, and how does that affect Lutheran Biblical interpretation?

Most Christians, regardless of their denomination, will state that they believe the Bible to convey the Word of God. However, what this means exactly may be different from one person or denomination to another. For Lutherans, the Bible is seen as conveying what God wants to say to humanity, and is thus inspired as well as authoritative. However, each of these terms must be explored further in order to understand how Lutherans interpret scripture.

The Word of God

What is meant by "Word of God" is paramount to understanding how Lutherans interpret scripture. Lutherans view the "Word of God" in three ways: First, the Incarnate Word (John 1:1,14); second, the proclaimed Word in the form of "law and gospel" (Acts 13:5; 18:11); and third, the written word (Mark 7:13).[1] This third functions as the Word of God in that it delivers the first two.

The "Inspired" Word of God

Lutherans, as well as many other Christians, will state they believe the Bible to be "inspired." This means that they do not believe God came down out of heaven and handed humanity the Bible, nor do they believe that the Bible was simply "dictated" by God to human scribes. Rather, the "inspired" Word of God means people's experiences of God have been recorded through a variety of people in different forms and literary methods. Thus, the Bible is both a divine Word as well as a human word. It relates the human experience of the divine through poetry, narratives, prophecies, insights, discussions, and even letters.

The Authority of Scripture

Lutheran professor Stan Olson states that a written text is authoritative in several different ways: 1) It is authoritative because it is the best available account one has of an event, life, etc., and 2) it is authoritative because the concepts are generally accepted, like a rule book for a sporting activity. While the Bible is authoritative in both these ways, for the Lutheran, it is primarily authoritative because of what it does: it communicates the grace of God through Jesus Christ.[2] Rather than trying to prove its origin, Lutherans simply testify to their experience of what the bible does: it changes lives.

The Living Word of God

Additionally, the Word of God, while contained in the Bible, does not remain relegated to the pages of the Bible. The power is not in the pages, but is in the impact the Word has on the hearer in the here and now. God's Word is thus "active" and "living" in the sense that it is actively doing something to people (and its power, since it's God's power, is not dependent upon the hearer!).

The "Literal" Word of God?

Many Christians will state that they believe the entire Bible to be the "literal word of God." Given the Bible is comprised of many different forms of literature (as mentioned above), Lutherans would probably say that they believe the literal parts literally, the metaphorical parts metaphorically, etc. When questions arise over how certain parts of the Bible should be read, Lutherans tend to turn to how it would have been heard/understood by its original audience. For example, how would first century Christians have understood apocalyptic literature? Symbolically or literally?

Thus, when Lutherans interpret books like Revelation, they usually will focus on the hope of Christ and the call for faithful perseverance in troubled times rather than trying to match up its imagery with modern world events. They would not out and out say this latter method is "wrong," but one would be hard-pressed to find a Lutheran pastor who would preach on Revelation in a way that did not highlight hope and perseverance, as these are the more "plainly understood" messages inherent in the text.

The "Inerrant" Word of God

This particular element of scripture is one that most Lutherans would probably find a bit more difficult to answer. Lutherans recognize that there are, technically, "errors" in the bible. There are grammatical errors (such as mixed metaphors), there are scientific errors (Jesus claims the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, but this is untrue--the orchid seed is smaller), there are places where scripture seems to contradict itself, etc. Does that mean the bible is "wrong" or "erroneous"? No. It means that the language and examples used fit the time and place of their authorship and serve a particular function. Certain words, parables, references, etc., were spoken into certain situations so that they could both be readily understood by the original hearers, as well as address a particular situation/issue that may or may not be relevant in today's context.

Scripture Interprets Scripture

Lutherans acknowledge that not only can scripture be misunderstood, but that it in fact has been misunderstood (yes, even by Lutherans!). However, the Lutheran process for interpreting difficult passages lies in the practice of reading the more difficult parts of scripture in light of those that are more readily understood, concentrating on the central themes and motifs that run throughout the entire Bible (such as faith, mercy and justice - Matt. 23:23). This process of "reading the Bible as a whole" thus resists "proof-texting," or using a single line of scripture to justify a stance that would not hold against the rest of scripture.

The Expectation of Scripture

Lutherans approach the Bible with a certain expectation: they expect that when they encounter scripture, they will also encounter God. They expect to be engaged by demands that judge them as well as promises of forgiveness that set them free to love and serve others. Lutherans are confident that just as God has addressed humanity in the past, God will continue to address them in their contemporary lives through the Biblical texts. This is a powerful expectation - but also a transformative one.

[1] [*Constitutions, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*](#), 19

[2] Diane Jacobson, Mark Allan Powell, Stanley N. Olson, *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008) 2

The Bible

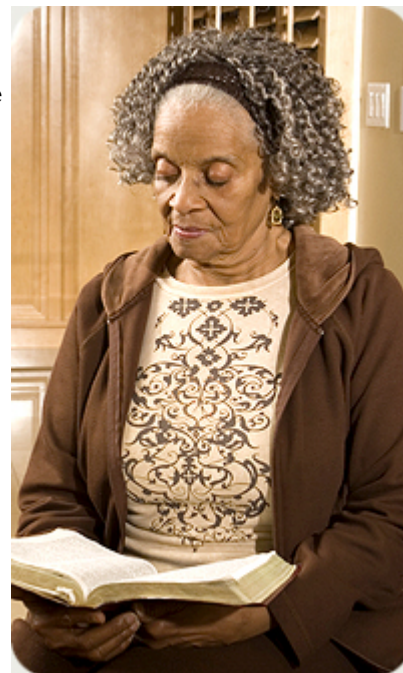
The Bible as encounter with the living Word

Lutherans believe that the Bible is the most important of all the ways God's person and presence are revealed to humanity. That is because it is in reading the biblical books that we most reliably hear and encounter the living Word of God, who is the risen Jesus.

The Bible's very name begins to tell us what we have between its covers. In Greek "the Bible" literally means "the books." The Bible that Lutherans use is a collection of 66 books produced over a period of as much as 1,000 years. Each of these books had a life and use of its own prior to its incorporation into what we know as the "sacred canon."

The Bible contains the story of God's interaction with humankind, first through the understanding of the Jewish people (Old Testament, 39 books), and subsequently to all people through God's self revelation in Jesus (New Testament, 27 books).

Lutherans believe that people meet God in Scripture, where God's heart, mind, relationship to - and intention for - humankind are revealed. Through an ongoing dialogue with the God revealed in the Bible, people in every age are called to a living faith.



The Bible's authority rests in God

ELCA Lutherans confidently proclaim with all Christians that the authority of the Bible rests in God. We believe that God inspired the Bible's many writers, editors and compilers. As they heard God speaking and discerned God's activity in events around them in their own times and places, the Bible's content took shape. Among other things, the literature they produced includes history, legal code, parables, letters of instruction, persuasion and encouragement, tales of heroism, love poetry and hymns of praise. The varying types and styles of literature found here all testify to faith in a God who acts by personally engaging men and women in human history.

At the same time, we also find in the Bible human emotion, testimony, opinion, cultural limitation and bias. ELCA Lutherans recognize that human testimony and writing are related to and often limited by culture, customs and world view. Today we know that the earth is not flat and that rabbits do not chew their cud (Leviticus 11:6). These are examples of time-bound cultural understandings or practices. Christians do not follow biblically prescribed dietary laws such as eliminating pork from one's diet (Leviticus 11:7) because the new covenant we have with God has replaced the Old Testament covenant God had with his people. Because Biblical writers, editors and compilers were limited by their times and world views, even as we are, the Bible contains material wedded to those times and places. It also means that writers sometimes provide differing and even contradictory views of God's word, ways and will.

Listening to the living Jesus in the context of the church, we therefore have the task of deciding among these. Having done this listening, we sometimes conclude either that the writer's culture or personal experience (e.g., subordination of women or keeping of slaves) seems to have prompted his missing what God was saying or doing, or that God now is saying or doing something new.

The Bible's authority is interpreted through Jesus

By no means does that human presence in sacred Scripture detract from the Bible's testimony to God. Rather, this human testimony provides layers of faith and insight by those who contributed to the canon. The Bible's reliability lies not in reading it as science or proscription, but as humankind's chief witness to God, reflecting on faith as it is to be lived. Again, ELCA Lutherans judge all Scripture through the window of God's chief act — that of entering human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth — and they interpret Scripture by listening to the living Jesus in the context of the Church. Because Jesus' person, life and witness become the lens through which we read and interpret all Scripture, we can judge slavery as "not of Jesus," yet understand the customs of the time and read Paul's inspiring letter to Philemon, master of the slave Onesimus, as testimony to faith.

On several occasions, Martin Luther suggested that not all books of the Bible have the same value for faith formation. Similarly, as in all of life, ELCA Lutherans ask, "Is what we find here consistent with God's revelation in Jesus?" This is a central question/prescription that provides guidance for acting

as moral beings and for calling humankind to justice; it also becomes the authority for our reading Scripture, for it is the Jesus of Scripture, the living Word, who reveals God and judges Scripture, just as he is the judge for all else in life. Therefore, it is a question that ELCA Lutherans find best answered within the life of the Church in community, for this risen Jesus is Lord of the Church.

Biblical interpretation as scholarly endeavor

ELCA Lutherans understand that the Bible contains various kinds of testimony to God's purpose for humanity. Included in its literary forms are history, story, parable, legal codes, hymns, inspirational and instructive letters, and personal faith testimony.

Some ancient Biblical content precedes the written word and was passed orally from generation to generation. Thereafter, early manuscripts were written fully or in part in a number of languages, principally Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. In order to duplicate and disseminate these manuscripts before the invention of the printing press texts were hand copied. While they are remarkable in their agreement and accuracy, sometimes - though mostly in minor matters — because of a copyist's writing, mistakes or incorporation of margin notes, these texts do not agree among themselves.

Manuscript variances raise questions among scholars concerning the original text's intent or meaning. For instance, did God use ravens or Arabs to feed Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:6)? The two words share the same Hebrew characters, and since the passage predates the use of vowels in the Hebrew language, manuscript translations vary according to which vowels were assigned later by the scribe-copyists.

It may be helpful here to distinguish studying Biblical texts from mining the Bible for devotional material. ELCA Lutherans honor and employ both approaches in faith formation. The distinctions are not clear cut, for elements of each are found in both approaches. Yet some Biblical material particularly lends itself to meditation or reflection on the will of God for faithful living (e.g. Hebrews 11 on examples of faith).

There is also the kind of textual study that dissects a passage for deeper meaning or insight. In so doing, one discovers clarification, or understanding that informs and shapes doctrine (e.g. Romans 5 on grace and justification).

ELCA Lutherans understand that the Bible can be read and understood by an individual. We also recommend its being read and interpreted in Christian community, using helps provided by scholarly work for this getting to the heart and meaning of Biblical texts.

Biblical "criticism"

To come to the best understanding of a text's meaning, ELCA Lutherans, together with Roman Catholics and most other churches, respect the light shone on Biblical passages by a number of scholarly methods of scriptural study. These are called "criticisms" in that a critical eye uses one of several methods to analyze texts in an attempt to discover their meaning. The term criticism is not to be understood as being critical of the text. In the example of God providing Elijah food, a highly specialized area of research called "textual criticism" would compare the diverse manuscript copies known to exist, as well as other similar ancient translations of the words in question, to determine the more likely meaning.

Other such helpful "criticisms" used to understand author intent are, to name just a few:

- Historical (applying knowledge of ancient languages, grammar, idioms, customs, etc.)
- Form (comparing literary forms used by the author with similar Biblical and non-Biblical literature found in legends, stories, narratives, etc.)
- Redaction (understanding how writers creatively shaped material they inherit and how, perhaps, they brought nuances from their own context and culture)

ELCA Lutherans and ELCA teaching scholars do not rely on a single critical approach to a text, but find a variety of approaches helpful for understanding the meaning of various passages. These scholarly tools help to inform and strengthen our knowledge, faith and understanding of God's marvelous acts, and point us to God's ongoing action in the world in every age.

by Norman Habel

to

or

to serve?

Two biblical texts make counter commands. Which one are we to believe?

Why did God create human beings? In the creation stories of Genesis there are two possible answers to that question. The first answer is that God created humans to rule and subdue Earth. The second is that God created humans to serve and preserve Earth. And there is currently a fierce debate as to which answer is preferable and what the implications might be.

The mandate to rule

In Genesis 1 we read that God created human beings in God's image. God then blessed them so that they would multiply and 'rule' over all other living creatures and 'subdue' Earth (1:26-28).

Now the Hebrew term for 'rule' refers to what a king does when he has dominion over his enemies or his subjects. In Psalm 72, for example, the psalmist prays that the 'rule' of the king would be from sea to sea, that his foes would bow down before him and

lick his feet. So, the normal meaning of the Hebrew term for 'rule' is to dominate.

And the Hebrew term for 'subdue' is just as tough. It can mean 'crush under foot' (Micah 7:19), 'ravish women' (Nehemiah 5:5) or conquer a land. The land of Canaan is pronounced 'subdued' after Joshua conquers it (Joshua 18:1). The normal meaning of the Hebrew term translated 'subdue' is to overcome or crush.

There are scholars who argue that because humans are in the image of God, they should rule as God rules, that is, with justice. Or they should conquer with compassion. Either way, the text seems to provide a mandate to dominate creation.

And in the history of Christianity we can find numerous leaders who declare that because humans are created superior to the rest of creation they are to represent God and rule over creation. In popular

jargon we still speak of 'harnessing' nature and 'conquering' Everest. That the mandate to dominate and subdue Earth was a living force among early settlers is illustrated by a 19th-century poem, *The Pioneers*, by Frank Masters, an elder in a Christian congregation in Driver River, New South Wales:

'It was the overflow westward of the mainland expansion that surged first to the plains of this goodly land.

Then tackled scrub with roller and axe, an exodus obedient to great Biblical command:

"Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it!" with its accompanied blessing.'

The commission to serve

In Genesis 2, however, we read that God made the first human and planted a forest of trees in Eden.

Then God placed the first human in that forest garden with the tasking of 'serving' and 'keeping' it. The normal meaning of the Hebrew term for 'serve' is precisely that, to serve as the subject of a king or as a priest in a temple. The Hebrew term rendered 'keep' means to preserve and protect. According to this text therefore the task of humans from the beginning was to serve and preserve Earth rather than rule over and subdue it.

We are faced with a dilemma. We have two texts that are saying opposing things. Ruling is the opposite of serving, and subduing is the opposite of preserving.

Some interpreters seek to harmonise the two texts and try to make them say the same thing. Some interpreters choose the second text because it seems far more relevant in the current crisis facing our planet. Some interpreters follow a third path, which I would identify as the Lutheran way.

Ruling or serving with Christ

The third way is governed by the gospel principle. According to this principle, we make our choice based on whether a text is consistent with the gospel message that the true nature of God is revealed in and through Jesus Christ, who suffered, died and rose again.

In the words of Luther, we search for *Was Christum treibet*, 'what points to Christ'. Or in other words, 'what is consistent with the essence of the gospel, the centre of the Christian Scriptures, the ultimate revelation of God in Christ'. The gospel revelation supersedes prior revelations which are to be read in the light of this revelation. Ultimately, where I must make a decision, I choose

what is consistent with this gospel principle. I choose the commission to serve rather than the mandate to dominate. That choice is made very clear in Jesus' own words when he tells his disciples that they are to serve, not to dominate like Gentile rulers (Mark 10:41-45). And this commission of Jesus is grounded in the profound

gospel message that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

What could be clearer? Jesus

could have claimed that, like the Son of Man described in Daniel, people should serve him as a mighty ruler. Instead, Jesus announces that he has come to serve and that his disciples should do likewise.

The extent of that 'serving' involves going all the way to the cross. The 'serving' of Christ is an expression of love, the love of God that brings hope and healing to all who suffer the effects of sin, whether humans or domains of creation.

Serving in the current crisis

We are facing a monumental crisis on our planet, a crisis caused by the effects of greenhouse gases. That crisis has been caused by humanity dominating creation, exploiting its resources and destroying its forests. Global warming is changing the complex ecosystem of our atmosphere. We are entering a greenhouse age, the opposite of an ice age.

We have ruled and subdued Earth instead of serving and preserving it. We have not followed the gospel principle exemplified by Jesus. If

serving means expressing a love that leads to the cross, how will we express our love for this planet?

We are facing a global crisis, with countries like China, USA and India relentlessly pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. How do we convince the leaders of these countries to preserve, rather than pollute, our

We have ruled and subdued Earth instead of serving and preserving it. We have not followed the gospel principle exemplified by Jesus

planet home? How do we get humans in power to hear the groaning of creation, the cries of injustice rising from the forests, the fields and the oceans? If we are to serve Christ and preserve Earth we need to listen to Earth's voice and be her advocate.

We need a campaign led by bodies such as the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches and other such representative organisations. We need them to heed the voice of Earth rather than multinational corporations bent on dominating Earth's resources. We need to find a worldwide movement that reaches the consciences of the world's leaders so that humanity, food supplies, diverse species, rich forests and all the natural wonders of this habitat we call Earth are preserved before it is too late. ■

Norman Habel is a Lutheran pastor who has been internationally involved in exploring how we might read the Bible from an ecological perspective and how we might celebrate the 'Season of Creation' (www.seasonofcreation.org).



Extracts from **Getting into the Story of Concord: some notes**

Some notes on the Augsburg Confession

In the forefront of the confessional vigor of the 1500s were the Lutherans, who stepped forth with the statement which is still recognized as the first and most important *Protestant* confession, the Augsburg Confession. Though it is a uniquely *Lutheran* confession, other Protestant groups respect it as the first formal declaration of what is recognized as Protestantism. Its ideas and structure have been incorporated in other confessions. To show its continued effectiveness over the past four centuries: Pope Paul VI upon the recommendation of advisers in 1976 was considering recognizing it as a valid expression of Christian truth.

On June 25, 1530, a date still honored by Lutherans, the Augsburg Confession was presented by German princes and other civil officials to Emperor Charles V. The presentation was made at a parliamentary-type gathering at Augsburg, Germany. Such meetings were called diets. This city has lent its name to the chief Lutheran confession. It may either be called the Augsburg Confession or the Augustana, the Latin for Augsburg.

Some notes on the Apology to the Augsburg Confession

Melanchthon's Apology is recognized as a masterpiece of theological scholarship. Here Luther's co-worker demonstrates a full comprehension of the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the early church fathers. Lutherans have always contended that their doctrine has been taken solely from the Bible, and in the Apology Melanchthon could demonstrate how this was done. The Augsburg Confession, intended for a public reading, was too brief for doing this satisfactorily. Melanchthon also took the opportunity to present the Lutheran position as in accord with that of the fathers of the ancient church. As a classicist, he had an appreciation for the antiquities. Now he had an opportunity to put this knowledge to full use.

The Apology is different in several ways from the Augsburg Confession which it seeks to defend. It is about seven times longer. Where the Augsburg Confession frequently makes its point in just a few sentences with only a slight reference to the Bible, if at all, the Apology provides a more elaborate argumentation. Here Melanchthon provides the elaborate exegesis of the Bible and a deep understanding of the church fathers.

Some notes on the Smalcald Articles

Charles V adopted the solution of calling a council, for which the Lutherans had long asked. He met with Pope Clement VII in Bologna to discuss the convening of a widely representative church council. The stated purpose of the council was "the utter extirpation of the poisonous, pestilential Lutheran heresy."

Could the Lutherans participate in a meeting if its purpose was to eradicate their beliefs?

Elector John of Saxony, Luther's own prince, accepted the invitation under protest. The Lutheran reply objected to any council prejudiced by the pope and not general, free, and impartial. After the response was sent off, the elector requested Luther to prepare a statement setting forth the essentials of the Lutheran faith. It was to state doctrinal limitations beyond which the Lutherans would not go. The result of this request is what we know today as the Smalcald Articles, a part of our *Book of Concord*. Points which Melanchthon glossed over in the Augsburg Confession are tackled head on by Luther in these articles. He had reached the point where, confronted by the pope, he would give up nothing.

The articles were presented to the elector on Jan. 3, 1537. The document's ultimate destination was a joint gathering of Lutheran theologians and princes scheduled for the German city of Smalcald on Feb. 8, 1537. Each of the groups were to meet separately. The theologians would concentrate on the doctrinal points to be discussed at the council called by the pope. The princes in a separate session would discuss its political ramifications.

Ultimately, the Smalcald Articles were recognized as the expression of authentic Lutheranism. The Formula of Concord says that they are a correct interpretation of the Augsburg Confession. In the Small Catechism Luther is teacher and in the Large Catechism Luther is the preacher, but in the Smalcald Articles Luther is the confessor.

Some notes on the Small Catechism

Generally the Small Catechism is regarded as something for children, but in Luther's title it is obvious that he intended it first "for pastors and preachers." The preface indicates that they were to use the catechism in the training of the youth after they had first understood it themselves. Soon it became a household item in many families in the Reformation countries, a staple in the devotional life of people. To this day it remains a classical and usable expression of the Christian faith.

The version adopted into the *Book of Concord* has nine parts: I. The Ten Commandments; II. The Creed; III. The Lord's Prayer; IV. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism; V. Confession and Absolution; VI. The Sacrament of the Altar; VII. Morning and Evening Prayers; VIII. Grace at Table; IX. Table of Duties. Its brevity, simplicity, clarity, and winsome approach give this document true theological greatness.

The commandments themselves are taken from the Old Testament books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. These commandments given through Moses are mostly negative. The words "Thou shalt not" are their hallmark. In his explanations Luther adds a positive aspect to them and makes this the most important. Each commandment serves its ultimate function when it cordons off a prohibited part of man's life but when it provides positive instruction for his whole existence.

Basic to Luther's approach in the Small Catechism is his dependence on the Holy Scriptures. For Luther all theology served justification, but equally true for him was that theology had to be drawn from Scripture as the Word of God.

Some notes on the Large Catechism

Luther wrote another document, the Large Catechism, which is not so widely known. Both these catechisms are part of our historic Lutheran Confessions. The Large Catechism is the result of Luther's own reediting of sermons he delivered between December 1528 and March 1529 and follows the outline so familiar to Lutherans in the Small Catechism – Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Luther had deliberate purpose in the organization of his catechisms. The commandments showed man his need; the creed shows him where help was to be found; and the Lord's Prayer showed him how he could ask and then receive the help he needed.

Luther intended that the Large Catechism be used chiefly as sermon material by the clergy, providing sermon material that priests not accustomed to public proclamation and unsure of evangelical doctrine could conveniently and safely use. From the pages of the Large Catechism the reader sees Luther in his double role as preacher and reformer. Here is the voice of a man who has come to the personal conviction that justification is by faith alone, and now that voice speaks with prophetic assurance. A certain unevenness among its sections reflects the ruddy jaggedness of Luther's confessional personality.

Notes on The Formula of Concord

The first 30 years of Lutheranism (1517-46) are the history of Lutheran survival in the face of threats from Roman Catholicism and then Reformed theology. The Lutherans were tempted either to go back to Rome or to go forward to join Zwingli, Calvin, and the Reformed. The second 30 years (1546-77) are the history of how Lutheranism managed to survive in the face of dissensions. Perhaps the threats of the second 30 years were more serious because now the enemies of Lutheranism called themselves "Lutheran" too. After this second struggle there was a restatement of Luther's faith in the Formula of Concord, a document reflecting the struggles among the Lutherans themselves. Its publication was accompanied by a reprinting of all those documents which we know as the historic Lutheran Confessions. After this there was to be no doubt about what it meant to be Lutheran. It meant accepting the Formula of Concord and the other Confessions listed there.

Extracts from **The Puzzle of the Gospels**
Dr Peter Vardy and Mary Mills

Each of the four gospels presents the story of Jesus in a distinctive way. Much in the four accounts is the same, but there are significant differences in the manner of presentation used by each gospel writer. The same scenes are inserted into the story at different points, and some traditional material is expanded whereas other material is abbreviated. In each case a chronological order is preserved with the climax being the death of Jesus on the cross. Matthew and Luke take the reader from cradle to grave to resurrection. John follows a similar model but does not start with Jesus' birth – instead he starts with Jesus' position as the Word of God which has entered in the world. Mark produces the shortest version of the story, beginning with the adult Jesus and ending with the empty tomb.

Matthew

Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfilment of the sacred scriptures of Judaism and of the Law and the prophetic tradition. This is a major focus for Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' adult life. Chapters 5-7 describe Jesus as a teacher and an interpreter of Law. It is important to understand that these chapters echo the work of Moses. In Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, Moses features as the great law-giver appointed by God. As Moses was given the commandments by God, so Jesus performs a similar role, although the content is different. Jesus does not lay down a long list of laws but instead gives an interpretation of the laws that already existed. He cuts through the *letter* of the Law to arrive at the *spirit* that lies beneath the surface. Jesus focuses on the generosity of spirit. It is not enough to be generous to friends and fellow citizens – it is necessary to be equally generous to one's enemies.

Instead of having to take tablets of stone from God's hands as Moses did, Jesus knows himself what has to be said. Moses brought the tablets of stone containing the Ten Commandments given by God down from a mountain (Exodus 19). Similarly Matthew portrays Jesus as teaching from a mountain (5:1). However Jesus is of greater significance as a source than Moses since he does not have to wait for God's intervention. Matthew shows Jesus as understanding the true significance of the Law from within his own heart so that he can validly explain it. Jesus' degree of intimacy with God is thus shown to be even greater than that of the great hero, Moses. However Jesus uphold true Judaism. Matthew sees Jesus' roots as firmly within the Jewish tradition, so Jesus can say:

Do not think I have come to abolish the law the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil them (5:17)

Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, emphasizes the great demands he makes on people. It is:

- not enough to simply obey the letter of the Jewish Law, people have to be faithful to the spirit that underlies the Law, which is much more demanding;
- not enough not to commit murder, people should not even be angry;
- not enough not to commit adultery, people should not even think about it;
- not enough not to break vows, people should not make vows at all, simply being bound by "Yes" or "No";
- not enough not to demand "an eye for an eye", people must exact no revenge at all;
- not enough to love your friends; people must love their enemies as well;
- not enough to give to charity, people must give in secret so that their gifts are not known;
- not enough to pray or fast, people must pray or fast sincerely and privately (5:17-6:18)

Mark

Jesus' power is revealed in his healings but also in his forgiving sins, a power that, in Jewish tradition, was reserved for God alone. So when Mark attributes this power to Jesus he is making a very special claim, which is rejected by some (2:7).

Jesus has a mysterious aspect to his ministry. He heals but tells those whom he heals not to explain what has happened to them. He teaches, but tells his disciples that most people will not understand his message. This mysterious side of Jesus is emphasized by Mark's use of the phrase "Son of Man". Of course, the term "Son of Man" appears more widely in the gospels than in Mark alone, but it is used by each evangelist to express a message about his own particular idea of Jesus. In Mark, the title is used as a way of emphasizing Jesus' enigmatic character. In a vital scene, Peter identifies Jesus specifically:

On the way [Jesus] asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; and still others one of prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah". Then he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. (8:27-30)

After Peter's proclamation Jesus replies by talking of how the Son of Man must die. In Mark's gospel, Jesus does not use the title of "Messiah" about himself until his trial. By having Jesus describe his own work less directly, through the title "Son of Man", Mark preserves the ambiguity in the figure of Jesus. He creates a gap between the visible healer and teacher and the invisible heavenly figure authorized to a kingship role by God. (cf. pp. 13-15).

Mark's Jesus is a radical and harsh figure. His own family and their ties of kinship are rejected and he teaches his followers that they must give up family and social setting if they are indeed to be part of the kingdom of God. Following God is portrayed as incredibly demanding and all human relationships and worldly wealth must be put firmly into second place (10:17-31).

Luke

Jesus is portrayed as a servant and this points forward to his work with prisoners, the blind and the oppressed, and to his teaching and healing ministry on which he embarks in Galilee. This concern with the weak and the underprivileged is not quite unique to Jesus – it was a common theme of the OT prophets who had a strong commitment to justice, particularly for groups like orphans and widows.

It is significant however, that in Luke's gospel the poor literally mean the poor – the word is used in a straightforward sense. Thus Luke records Jesus as saying:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (6:20)

It is this idea that has led many modern Christian writers to maintain that it is necessary for anyone who wants to follow Christ to take a preferential "option for the poor". In Matthew's gospel, by contrast, this working is significantly changed:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:3)

Matthew, therefore, alters the emphasis. This could be an indication that he was writing for a more affluent community who would not have liked the idea of Jesus singling out the literally poor as being blessed. Matthew's audience might have found it more congenial to identify with spiritual rather than material poverty.

Luke sums up the entire tradition about Jesus in a way which makes him a prophet as well as a king. Jesus will act as Messiah by bringing relief to human needs and in this way extend the kingly rule of God, taking power over demons and human opponents alike. Just like Elijah (1 Kings 17) and Elisha (2 Kings 4), Jesus raises a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17). He is therefore portrayed, like them, as a famous prophet of power. Jesus is shown as being compassionate to the weak and vulnerable, and with the power to give back life to the dead. Jesus is thus the paradigm of the prophet-king.

Outsiders

In Jesus' work, Luke focuses on his openness to the outsider, to the marginalized. In 7:1-9 Jesus not only heals the servant of a foreigner (a Roman centurion!) but wonders at the depth of faith such as a foreigner, an outsider, can have. Later in the chapter, Jesus allows a sinful woman to touch him and to wash his feet with her tears, even though the touch of such a woman made him ritually defiled (7:36-49). Again Jesus rejects the "outsider/insider" distinction.

Luke introduces controversy here. The Pharisees criticize Jesus' wisdom and leadership because of the latter event. It implies, after all, that Jesus is rejecting the Torah, the Jewish Law. Jesus, however, is proclaiming the spirit that underlies the Law rather than its letter, and he shows an openness to outsiders who are genuinely wanting to come closer to God. Luke frequently expresses this through stories about Jesus being happy to share his table-fellowship with many types of people, people with whom those who kept to the letter of the Law would never consider eating.

John

The members of the early Christian community were prepared to put absolute trust in their memories of Jesus. This absolute trust in Jesus led to further reflection on the meaning of him. And this further thinking is set out in the great discourses which are woven into the Book of Signs. These portray Jesus as making long speeches in which he explains his significance.

There is a similarity in the discourses as each of them portrays Jesus as the fulfilment of major themes of Jewish tradition. In addition, the opening phrase in each of the discourses is "I am..." and this draws the reader's attention to who Jesus is. This is a common formula used in Jewish and pagan texts in the ancient world when a messenger reveals his identity.

In a difficult passage in John 8, Jesus ends the debate about himself with the statement:

I tell you, before Abraham was, I am. (8a58)

This points back to the Prologue and the idea that Jesus is God's unique, eternal Word. Indeed, Jesus as God's Word was present at creation (1:3-4). This makes a clear link between Jesus and God which can be seen as expanded and enriched in Jesus' self-descriptions in the discourses when he says, "I am..." (Water, Bread, Life, Light, Shepherd, Gate)". Each of these descriptions is taken from the Jewish tradition.

Water This is an absolute but scarce necessity in Palestine and in Jewish tradition is the means of cleansing and purification. Living water in rivers, springs and wells becomes a symbol for life and health in Ezekiel 47 and is used as such in John 4:14 where Jesus talks of giving the woman by the well "living water".

Bread This source of nourishment from heaven is what God gave to the Israelites after they left slavery in Egypt and where in the desert (Numbers 11). It seems that by the first century this text has been interpreted by some Jews to mean that the Law given by God through Moses in the desert was the true bread which nourished the soul. In 6:35 this tradition is given a new understanding. Jesus is portrayed as the ultimate bread from heaven. When an individual meditates on the person of Jesus he or she feeds the inner self with God's own food.

Life God alone has eternal life and Jesus, representing God, offers this eternal life to all believers. The story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus reveals that Jesus is *life* here and now. If anyone believes this, then he or she will share already in God's own life – a foretaste of what lies beyond the grave. (See the chapter on "Eternal Life" in *The Puzzle of God* by Peter Vardy where the significance of John's account of eternal life for contemporary philosophy of religion is explained.)

Light God is the source of light, and light (sunlight) creates life in the world. OT visionaries such as Ezekiel and Daniel saw God in a blaze of light. When Moses came down for Sinai his face shone so much with God's reflected glory that people could not bear to look at him and he had to go veiled (Exodus 34:33-35). Jesus now appears as the bearer of this same light to the world. He brings God's life-giving rays in the darkness of the world. (The Prologue also emphasizes this same theme.)

Each of the discourses begins with a theme and then explores it through the words of Jesus. The story then returns to show that the best way to understand a deeper truth is to see how it points to the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is the means by which heavenly truth is brought to human beings.

Extracts from **Crossways! A survey course of the narrative and major themes of the old and new testaments**

[pp. 411-412]

MARK MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS

1. All but one of Jesus' miracles (as reported in Mark) were done in and around Galilee. Jesus performs only one miracle after leaving Galilee; He heals blind Bartimaeus near Jericho, 10:46-52. He performs no miracles in or near Jerusalem, that "city of opposition."
2. In Mark 8:27-30 Jesus puts two crucial questions to His disciples. The first is: "*Who do MEN say that I am?*" The second is: "*Who do YOU say that I am?*" He did not put that kind of questions to anyone prior to that time. Even so, prior to that time He *was* recognized – by the *demons!* 1:24, 1:34, 3:11, 5:7. Even *blind* Bartimaeus knew who He was. Though he could not see Jesus with his eyes, he could "see" Him with his heart and accordingly called out: "*Jesus, Son of David,*" 10:47.
3. The demons knew who He was. A blind man could "see" Him. But what about the people, the disciples? We do well to remember that often Jesus' actions carried a double message. He gave sight to a blind man, and in so doing declared Who He was. But His actions also said to those about Him: "*This man's eyes are shut, but he can see. Yours are open, but can you really see who I am?*" In Mark 8:22-26 He opened the eyes of a blind man "in stages." His actions ask: "*Can you see fully and clearly who I am, or do your eyes need to be opened still further?*"
4. On those occasions when Jesus was recognized, He warned the person or spirit who had recognised Him not to say anything to anyone about the matter. Why? First, Jesus wanted to make it very clear that in Him the Messianic Age had come, and that He was indeed the Messiah. Second, He wanted to make it abundantly clear *just what kind of a Messiah He had come to be*. The community contained many burning with desire to be rid of the Romans and to gain political independence for the nation. They were ready at the drop of a hat to declare "bloody war" on their Roman overlords. Jesus needed time to make it abundantly clear that He was not the kind of Messiah that would fit in with that kind of expectation. He had not come to be a political deliverer, see 1:33, 44; 5:43; 9:9; but note 5:19,20.
5. Nowhere in the Gospel does one read of Jesus doing anything to benefit Himself. He consistently refused to use His divine power to perform any miracle to service His own personal needs. Even when He was hungry, He chose to remain hungry rather than change stones into bread, Matthew 4:4. Jesus was always and ever "The Servant". He came to place Himself and His powers at the service of men. He manifested this spirit in all of His miracles. *The form of the Servant was the very essence of His total life and ministry.*
6. As He moved among people, Jesus demonstrated *remarkable compassion*. For example, before healing the outcast leper, He reached out and touched him, 1:40-45. By way of contrast, the Pharisees on occasion threw rocks at lepers and said that their suffering had come about as a result of some great sin that they had committed. Furthermore, He sought out the company of "*sinners, tax collectors, and the like,*" 2:15-17. No wonder the scribes and Pharisees were upset. They felt that if He really was the Messiah, He would seek out the "righteous" (namely, them) in the community. Finally, Jesus even went to the help of a Gentile woman, 7:24-30. The Jew/Gentile issue is of little consequence to us today, but at the time of Jesus it was *emotionally charged!* Jesus' concern for the Gentiles would have been repugnant to the many in Israel who believed that when finally the Messianic Age came, the Gentiles would be destroyed – or at best made slaves of the Jews.
7. Jesus claimed for Himself the right to forgive sins, 2:1-12. His claim incensed the scribes, who insisted that only God could forgive sins, 2:7. How right they were! Unfortunately for them, in their blindness they could not see Who it was that stood before them!
8. Again and again, Jesus ignored traditional attitudes concerning the observance of the Sabbath, 1:21, 2:23, 3:2. What mattered for Him was the well-being of people, not the keeping of rituals and traditions. This attitude on Jesus' part was bound to bring Him into headlong confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees, in that through His actions Jesus called into question the validity of their understanding of the Law.

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

The concept of Jesus' *authority* plays a central role in Mark's gospel. The various ways in which Jesus' authority manifested itself are listed:

1. Jesus demonstrated His authority over the forces of nature, 4:35-41; 6:45-52. In so doing, He assumed the rights and powers reserved in the Old Testament for God Himself.
2. Jesus is described as *a Teacher with amazing authority*, 1:21-22. His approach was very different from that of the scribes and Pharisees. They tended to get bogged down in a multitude of minute details, and continually appealed to this or that rabbi to buttress their opinions. Jesus said simply, *"I say to you."*
3. Jesus declared Himself to be the One possessing authority *to reveal the secrets of the Kingdom of God*, 4:10, 11, 34. The Jews believed that somehow or other they could influence the coming of the Kingdom by their actions. Jesus said that the Kingdom broke in with Him. He made it known. It is given through Him.
4. Jesus set Himself *above the Law*. The Jews said that the link between God and His people was the Law. In setting Himself above the Law, Jesus claimed that He was the ultimate authority, the link between heaven and earth. See 3:14-17, 18, 19; 7:1-23.
5. Jesus asserted authority over *the Sabbath*, 2:27-28. He insisted that what mattered was not the observance of ritual, but the meeting of need.
6. Jesus demonstrated authority over *the Temple*, 11:15-18. For the Jew, the Temple symbolized the perpetual presence of God among His people. It was the Sadducees' focus of piety. Jesus replaced the Temple with Himself. He was God's Presence among people. He was the point of contact between heaven and earth. This claim would have angered the Sadducees, just as His claim to have authority over the Law would have angered the Pharisees.
7. Jesus claimed authority over *Satan and the realm of the demonic*, 3:19-27; 5:1-13. Jesus declared that He had come to bind the strong man (Satan) and plunder his goods. In other words, He came to destroy the kingdom of Satan and establish the Kingdom of God.
8. Jesus declared that He had authority *"to forgive sin,"* 2:1-12. Many Jews thought that sickness was the result of some sin which had been committed. In the incident outlined in 2:1-12, the onlookers could have *said* to the paralytic, "your sins are forgiven," even as they could have *said* "take up your bed and walk." However, they could only *say* these things. Jesus could both *say* and *effect* them.
9. Jesus possessed authority *over death*, 5:21-43; 12: 18-27. He demonstrated that authority over death in others, and over death in Himself.

MATTHEW THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES

Matthew's general outline, and the way he structures what he has to say within that outline, suggest that he saw in Jesus a *New Moses*. His teaching supplants all that existed previously. His mission brought into existence *New Israel*. However, Jesus was more than a mere Lawgiver. He came to carry out a *New Exodus*, to free God's people from bondage to sin, Satan, judgments, and condemnation, and to lead them into that realm in which they would know the joy of living under their gracious God and the freedom that went hand in hand with taking *Christ's* yoke on them. (Note that the rabbis spoke of the yoke of the Law, Matthew 11:28-30).

It is significant that one of the first things Jesus does when His ministry gets under way is to take His new people to a mountain and proclaim to them the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7. The directions for life that Jesus shared with His hearers on that occasion are not in any way to be understood as some new set of regulations His followers are to try to keep to persuade God to forgive and accept them. The spirit of the Sermon on the Mount reflects the spirit of the events outlined in Exodus 19-20. On that occasion God gave His will to that people He had already declared to be His own; that people He had gathered to Himself in covenant mercy. Jesus, the New Moses, gave His new will to His new people in a similar spirit. He had gathered to Himself people who had no claim on Him whatsoever. He had summoned them into fellowship with Himself with the words, "*Follow Me*," 4:19. They were His, not because of any merit on their part, but because of His effective call. It is worthy of note that the first word Jesus spoke in His famous sermon was "*Blessed*," 5:3. He used it nine times within as many verses, 5:3-11.

It is significant that Jesus' first actions after giving the Sermon on the Mount were to heal a leper and a Gentile. The Pharisees used the *Old Law* in such a way that separation from lepers (*out-casts*) and Gentiles was a necessity for the "righteous man." They used the Law in such a way that it became a wall between themselves and those who needed their help. Jesus' actions, as outlined in Matthew 8:1-13, were living demonstrations of the path of true obedience to the will of His Father.

Jesus insisted He had not come to destroy the Law and the prophets, but to fulfil them, Matthew 5:17. In other words, He brought the Law to its intended meaning, purpose, and fullness. He reduced all commandments to the practice of love. Love is not merely a warm emotion about others. It is rather that act of the will which impels a person to seek nothing but good for his fellowman and to express that desire in concrete action. Love is not a lesser righteousness, but a greater one.

Note well that Jesus did not call people into the part-time service of God. His statement, "*But seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness*" (Matt. 6:33) would be more correctly translated: "*Seek ONLY God's kingdom and His righteousness*"; note 4:10, "*Him only shall you serve*." The parallel passage in Luke 12:31 reads: "*Seek His kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well*." Jesus insists there are to be no priorities in a person's life, no first, second, third, etc., priority, for the simple reason that a person is to seek to live *ONLY FOR GOD* by seeking to live *only for his neighbor*. That is what life under God in His Kingdom is all about.

Jesus flatly refused to accept (as did the Pharisees) the traditions of the elders, the Oral Law. He referred to the directions given in the Oral Law and then rejected them outright with: "*But I say unto you*," Matthew 5:21-28. These traditions tended to make the keeping of the Law an intolerable burden. The Pharisees, in particular, had reduced the union of man with God to a carefully fixed set of routine, external observances – to a manmade product. They denied man's sinfulness, because they did not really understand the Law. They polished the outside of the vessel, but they interpreted the Law in such a way that it did not touch their hearts, Matthew 23:25, 26; see all of chapter 23.

Jesus' description of the Final judgment is rich in overtones, Matthew 25:31-46. He assures His own that His meeting with them on that Last Day will be a *Welcome Home Day* ("Come, you blessed of My Father . . ."). Furthermore, He points to those things for which He will commend them: *simply, ordinary, everyday, down-to-earth acts of service for others that anyone can do*. Note well the complete lack of any spirit of work-righteousness in this passage. Those whom He welcomes and commends respond with, "*Lord, when did we see Thee hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison?*" He commends His own only for what they have done for others, but in the final analysis those *others* are *Himself* ("Him only shalt thou serve," 4:10).

In Matthew 18:20 we read: "*For where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them*." This statement should be compared with a saying in the *Pirke Aboth* ("The Sayings of the Fathers"); "*When they sit together and are occupied with the Torah, the Shekinah is among them*," 3:8. Jesus' words declared that He, His Person, His teaching, and His example replaced the Torah. Furthermore, He would continue among His own until the end of the age, Matthew 28:20. While His people wait for Him to come again, they are not to be idle. They are to seek to make disciples for Him from among all nations and to teach them to observe what Jesus has commanded them. Because the Jews rejected Jesus, the world was opened up for the proclamation of His Gospel. Israel itself should have proclaimed the Messiah to the world, but Israel would not accept Him. The Old Israel was therefore replaced by the New Israel, the Church. The New Israel was to see it that the will of its Lord was done.

LUKE CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTENT

1. Luke manifests a *universal concern* for all people of all nations. The Gospel is *Volume One* of a *Two Volume Work* whose overall concern is to show how that mighty saving work of God which began in the Jerusalem Temple (1:8f) eventually spread to Rome, Acts 28:14. Though Jesus does not preach to the Gentiles *Volume One*, He (as the Risen Lord working through the Church) preaches to them repeatedly throughout *Volume Two*.

Some of the ways in which this *universal concern* expresses itself are the following: Luke alone of the evangelists includes in the quotation from Isaiah, "*and all flesh shall see the salvation of God*," 3:6; see Isaiah 40:3-5. Simeon speaks of the salvation which comes with Jesus as "*a light for revelation to the Gentiles*," 2:32. The Samaritans are spoken of in a good light, 9:51-56; 10: 30-37; 17:11-19. Jesus refers to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian leper as those to whom the prophets of old were sent (4:25-27), indicating that often foreigners received God's help when Israel did not. As in both Matthew (27:54) and Mark (15:39), the Roman centurion makes an admirable confession beneath the cross, 23:47. The lists of officials in 2:1ff and 3:1ff indicate that Jesus' ministry was to have international repercussions. Finally, Luke traces Jesus' genealogy back to Adam to point out that in Jesus (*the New Adam*) God was at work to make a new beginning to *the human race*, 3:23-38.

2. Luke presents Jesus as one demonstrating *great compassion*. He loves to be in the company of those the Jews want to avoid: the poor, the Samaritans, lepers, publicans, soldiers, public sinners in disgrace, and unlettered shepherds. But then, Jesus Himself went the way of the poor and lowly servant. When he came to earth, His arrival was not heralded by a cosmic fireworks display with a heavenly orchestra providing background music. He simply came quietly down the back stairs at Bethlehem and placed Himself into the crook of a woman's arms. One of the points Luke makes in 2:1-12 is that news about Jesus' birth was announced first to *shepherds*. They were looked on as "*nobodies*", as virtual outcasts, by the religious elite in Jerusalem. Even so, God saw fit to let them be the first to hear the good news about the birth of His Son! The poor and insignificant are chosen to play an important role in the life of Jesus. A childless and aged couple gave birth to the Forerunner, John the Baptist, 1:18. Mary and Joseph were without social standing. Those who acknowledged the infant Jesus in the Temple were an aged man and an elderly widow, 2:22-35, 36-28.
3. Luke is the Gospel of *The Great Pardons*. It tells how Jesus dealt with a "sinful" woman in a most compassionate way, 7:36-50. It records the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, chapter 15. In it, Jesus tells Zacchaeus that He wants to dine with him, 19:1-10. At Calvary, Jesus prays for His executioners (23:34) and makes a sublime promise to one of the thieves executed with Him, 23:39-43.
4. Luke is *The Gospel of Joy*. Matthew's Gospel is sombre and majestic; Mark's is urgent. However, Luke stresses the *joy* that comes to those who believe the gracious word of pardon that the Father speaks to them through His Son, 15:6, 7, 9, 10, 20-24, 32. Reference is made to how the crowds respond with admiration to Jesus' ministry, 5:26; 10:17; 13:17; 18:43.
5. In Luke, Jesus always has time *to show understanding and sympathy*. He pauses on the way to Calvary to speak with the weeping women, 23:27-31. He heals the servant whose ear Peter has cut off, 22:51. When Peter denied Him, He paused to look at him, 22:61.
6. A concern for the *well-being of women* is reflected throughout the Gospel. In Palestine, a woman was often merely a "thing" with no legal rights whatsoever. In Luke, Jesus comes into contact with them again and again and treats them with dignity and understanding: Elizabeth; Anna the prophetess; the widow at Nain, 7:11-17; the woman in Simon's house, 7:36-50; Mary Magdalene out of who he cast seven devils, Susanna, Joanna the wife of Herod's steward, Chuza, 8:2, 3; Mary and Martha, 10:38-42; and the weeping daughters of Jerusalem, 23:27-31.
7. Luke's Gospel is *The Gospel of Absolute Renouncement*. Jesus' disciples must leave all things to follow Him, 5:11. They must be totally dedicated to Jesus, 9:62. Luke alone adds the word *wife* to the list of what some will be asked to give up for the sake of the kingdom, 14:26. The disciples must sell what they have and give alms, 12:33. They will have to carry their cross throughout life, 9:23. However, they are asked to endure nothing different from their Master Who must also "suffer," 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44. In this context note how Luke stresses again and again the threat that money and earthly possessions pose to discipleship, 12:13-34; chapter 16.
8. Detachment from the demands and standards of the world is only possible because Jesus and His disciples remain continuously dedicated to God in this *Gospel of Prayer and the Holy Spirit*. Jesus prays before every important step in His ministry: His baptism, 3:21; before choosing the Twelve, 6:12; before Peter's declaration that He is the Messiah, 9:18; at the Transfiguration, 9:28; before teaching His disciples how to pray, 11:1; in Gethsemane, 22:41. Jesus not only prayed with fervor Himself, but insisted that His followers be people of prayer also, 6:28; 10:2; 11:1-13; 18:1-8; 21:36.

9. Luke refers repeatedly to *the work of the Spirit*, 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-27; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12. The Spirit is now given, not only to special individuals like the judges of old but to John the Baptist (1:15, 80) and his parents, 1:41;67. Jesus' conception is brought about by the Spirit (1:35), and He himself is filled with the Holy Spirit, 4:1. What the Spirit did in connection with the life of Jesus continues on after His ascension in the church. The Spirit continues to work in the same obvious, prominent way throughout Luke's *Volume Two*, Acts. It is significant to note that the "good things" the Father will surely give to those who ask Him (Matt. 7:11), become "the Holy Spirit" in Luke 11:13.
10. The Spirit Who has taken up residence in Jesus spreads joy and peace among those who listen to Him. Luke's Gospel might well be called *the Gospel of Messianic Joy*. Terms like the Greek *Makarios* (translated by *happy, fortunate*) occur repeatedly, 1:45; 6:20-22; 7:23; 10:23; 11:27f; 12:37f; 14:14f; 23:29.
11. Matthew and Mark at times give the impression that they expected the return of Jesus in the very near future, Mark 14:62; Matthew 26:64. Note Luke's version of Jesus' words, "*But from now on the Son of Man SHALL BE SEATED at the right hand of the power of God,*" 22:67-69. Luke looked beyond the time of the Ascension to the time of the history of the Church. He suggested to his readers that it would be some time before the Lord returned.
12. Luke contains some of the best-known and best-loved incidents and parables in the life of Jesus:
 - The Good Samaritan, 10:25-37
 - Mary and Martha, 10:38-42
 - The Lost Sheep, Coin, and Son, chapter 15
 - The Unjust Steward, 16:1-9
 - Dives and Lazarus, 16:19-31
 - The Thankful Samaritan, 17:11-19
 - The Pharisee and the Publican, 18:9-14
 - Zacchaeus, 19:1-10
13. *The blame for Jesus' crucifixion* is laid fairly and squarely at the feet of the Jews, 20:20, 26; 23:2, 5, 18f, 23, 25. Though the Roman authorities were involved in the events of the Passion history, they are not blamed for what transpired.
14. Though Luke very seldom quotes the Old Testament prophecies, he refers to *Jesus as a prophet* more often than Mark; see Luke 4:24; 7:16, 39; 9:19. Jesus' role reflects that of Elijah – one sent to the Gentiles. Though Jesus never preaches to the Gentiles in Luke, His prophetic ministry is fulfilled in the ministry of the church. Note the following parallels:

	<i>Luke</i>	<i>Acts</i>
Baptism of the Spirit	3:21f	2:1ff
Preaching about the Spirit	4:16-19	2:17
Rejection	4:29	7:58, 13:50
Cure of the Crowds	4:40f	2:43, 5:16
Glorification	9:28-36	1:9-11
15. Luke avoids the repetition of similar events. Note the following:

One anointing of Jesus	7:36-50	
One multiplication of loaves and fishes	9:12-17	
One barren fig tree		13:6-9
One return of the disciples in the garden	22:39-46	
One trial before the Jewish authorities	22:66-71	

He also omits scenes of violence or disrespect: the murder of John the Baptist, Mark 6:14-29, the impatient remarks of the disciples, Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25; the outrages committed during the Passion, Mark 14:65; 15: 15-19. He also omits the reference to Jesus being "beside Himself," Mark 3:21. On the cross, Jesus utters no cry of declaration, but simply commits His spirit into the hand of the Father, 23:46.

JOHN HELPS FOR READING WITH UNDERSTANDING

1. The language of John's Gospel is very simple. However, it contains a deep message. Simple phrases such as "*it was night*" (13:30) often have double meaning.
2. The Gospel contains no stories of Jesus' childhood and birth. Instead, the Gospel begins with comments about the Son of God in eternity, and in so doing uses language that reflects Genesis 1.
3. The first three Gospels contain short sayings of Jesus. However, in John, Jesus gives long speeches which circle around a central theme or word like "Life," "Light," etc. There is no command to keep his identity a secret. His identity is stated openly in grand terms from the very beginning. The series of titles ascribed to Jesus in chapter 1 has its "grand finale" in 20:28, where Thomas falls down before him and declares, "*My Lord and My God!*"
4. Though Jesus speaks to the crowds also in John, He is usually found in dialogue with individuals, such as Nathanael, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Mary, Martha, Thomas, Peter, and so on. On the other hand His opponents are not so much the scribes and Pharisees, but simply "the Jews" – especially the Jewish leaders who reject Him.
5. The miracles Jesus performs in John are called "signs." There are seven in all:

2:1-12	Jesus changes water into wine at Cana in Galilee
4:43-54	Jesus heals the official's son
5:1-16	The healing of the paralytic
6:1-15	The feeding of 5,000 in the wilderness
6:16-24	Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee
9:1-41	A blind man is given sight
11:1-44	Lazarus is raised from the dead

These "signs" reveal a deep truth about Jesus' Person and mission.

6. There are many similes or images in John's Gospel (see 3:8, 3:29; 4:35-38; 5:19; 8:35; 10:1-4; 11:9; 16:21) but no parables. Jesus calls Himself the *I AM*, the name of God Himself (Exod. 3:14) in 4:26, 8:24, 28, 58; and 13:19. More important, seven times He says *I am* . . . with something to follow to identify Himself.
7. John's Gospel has a dramatic overarching theme. It pictures Jesus coming into the world to face something like a court trial. The accusation against Him is that He is an imposter and a blasphemer. Witnesses for the prosecution and defense are called, and the world seems to gain the victory *until the Resurrection puts the record straight*. The language of a trial can often be detected. Words like *witness* and *judge* are common. John mentions the following witnesses for Jesus:
 - a. John the Baptist, 1:7-19, 32-34; 3:28; 5:32-34
 - b. Jesus Himself, 3:11, 32, 33; 5:31; 8:13-18; 18:37
 - c. Jesus' works or signs, 5:36; 10:25
 - d. God the Father, 5:37; 8:18
 - e. The Scriptures, 5:39
 - f. The Holy Spirit, 15:26
 - g. The disciples, 15:27
 - h. The evangelist, 19:35, 21:24
 - i. The Samaritan woman, 4:39
 - j. A crowd of people, 12:17

Others, even if not called witnesses, also testify to Jesus, e.g. Pilate, who actually proclaimed the truth about Jesus' Person, even if his superscription on the cross was meant to be a bad joke, 19:19-22.

8. John does not include information about that incident at Caesarea Philippi in which Jesus asked the disciples who the people thought He was, and what they thought He was, Mark 8:27-30. However, note what might be classified as *A Confession of Peter* at John 6:68.

9. In John's Gospel, as in Mark, the crowds come and the crowds go; note 6:2, 14, 15, 66, 67. Though they were keen to make Him their king, they did not understand the kind of King He had come to be, 6:15.
10. John does not make reference to the following events:
 - a. Jesus' baptism (although he alludes to it, 1:29-34)
 - b. Jesus' temptation
 - c. Jesus curing lepers
 - d. Jesus' association with outcasts and sinners
 - e. The transfiguration event (Matt. 17:1-9)
 - f. The institution of the Lord's Supper
 - g. The agony of Gethsemane
 - h. The cry of dereliction on the cross

However, no real conclusion can be drawn from these omissions. Some of them did not fit into John's overall purpose. Though there is no transfiguration *event*, Jesus is "transfigured" throughout the Gospel. His glory is an on-going manifestation. Furthermore, though John does not make specific reference to the Words of Institution of the Lord's Supper, he alludes to them in 6:51b-71; his counterpart to Matthew, Mark and Luke's account is the footwashing event, 13:1-17. He speaks of the *desired outcome* of participation in the Lord's Supper rather than about the elements distributed and received in that observance.

11. Among Jewish expectations about the coming Messiah were the following:
 - a. His origins would be obscure: see 7:27
 - b. He would perform signs; see 7:31
 - c. He would come from Bethlehem, see 7:42
 - d. He would abide for ever, see 12:34
12. The terms *the living water*, *the bread of life*, and *the light of the world* were in common use among the rabbis of Jesus' day. They used them to refer to the Law, the *Torah*, God's revelation of Himself and His truth in the Old Testament. The fact that Jesus applied them to Himself said a lot to His hearers, 4:7-15; 6:25-51a; 8:12-30.
13. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the event that is the "last straw" for the Jews is the cleansing of the Temple. However, the "last straw" in John is the raising of Lazarus from the dead, 11:45-53, 57. That act so enraged the authorities that they planned to do away not only with Jesus but with Lazarus as well, 12:10, 11.