6 | Exegesis of the Greek Scriptures

The principles required for responsible interpretation of the New Testament

Enrichment Version

The Enrichment Version is designed for those who wish to explore principles that lead to healthy procedures for comprehending and applying the New Testament without the intention of pursuing either a certificate or a degree. This syllabus is identical to the one used by credit and degree-track students, except it is void of Internet articles, videos, listings of secondary resources, exams, and writing assignments. There is nothing to submit for professorial review or grading. Therefore, the Enrichment syllabus is available for downloading without cost. Interested parties may glean substantial knowledge, comprehension, and understanding of New Testament exegesis through this guide.

Other courses deal with the people, places, and events of the Greek Scriptures and their meaning. This course in exegesis is concerned with the student's own ability to interpret New Testament texts. The need to do personal interpretation presupposes that spiritual maturity rests upon good exegesis.

The course assumes the student has a good understanding of the nature and content of the New Testament. The task here is to select samples of biblical texts and consider how they should be studied and what application can be made for the present day. The course is organized in four modules: (1) Interpreting the New Testament, (2) Matthew and Mark, (3) Acts and the Modern Church, and (4) The Book of Revelation.

Objectives

• Recognize the nature of New Testament compositions

• Identify rules, vocabulary, and principles for interpreting New Testament genres

• Apply New Testament texts to contemporary situations

Course Learning Outcomes

At the end of the course, the student will be able to

1. Recognize the literary genre of biblical passages.

2. Compose an exegesis of a biblical passage using standard rules.

3. Demonstrate the relevance of the New Testament for modern application.

A Letter of Introduction

The course is similar to the one that deals with exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures. However, it differs in a few ways. First, you will be introduced to additional genre of writing. For example, the Gospels are unique in purpose, content, and scope. Even within the Gospels, you will meet the parables of Jesus. Jesus' parables have much in common with everyday parables, but most people tend to miss the point. The tendency has been to see more than is intended. In so doing, people often get trapped in details and fail to understand what Jesus was saying.

Another reason for studying this course is to learn more about how Old Testament prophecy is treated by the authors of the New Testament. The modern reader can make assumptions about prophecy that are not supported by the biblical text. In an effort to be apologetic, people are more willing to force the application. This is not to say that prophets were in error. It is to say that a "fuller" meaning is often implied by the biblical writer than a straight-forward prediction.

You will also find a more appropriate way to read historical narrative than as dry history. You will discover scope and depth in the Epistles often missed in verse-by-verse detailed commentary. And who needs to be reminded of the abuses of the Book of Revelation?

This course may not answer all your needs, but it does promise to give you a boost toward sound interpretation. No one intends to make the Bible say more or less than its authors intended. But reckless treatment will surely lead down a wrong path. It is not a matter of getting the answers your professor wants you to get. It is not about communicating someone else's interpretation. It is about learning how to do sound exegesis and exposition.

Procedure

1. The syllabus has four modules. Review the Course Summary, then become familiar with each module to see the layout of the course.

2. Work through Module 1 and perform the activities fully as you come to them.

3. As you come to the end of Module 1, review the material to make sure you have not missed anything. Use the Things to Know section as a guide.

4. Upon completing Module 1, move on to the other modules.

5. Perform the operations specified in the body of Module 4 and complete the Exegesis assignment.

Things to Know

1. The goal of interpretation
2. The role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation
3. Principles for interpreting biblical narrative
4. Principles for interpreting Old Testament prophecy in a New Testament setting
5. Principles for interpreting biblical parables
6. Principles for interpreting the Apocalypse
7. The relation between exegesis and application
8. The purpose of Acts
9. Implication of Acts for modern preaching and teaching
10. Implication of Acts for Christian fellowship

11. Implication of Acts for modern worship
12. Implication of Acts for church organization and leadership

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Exegesis of the Greek Scriptures

Welcome to *Exegesis of the Greek Scriptures*. The course is complementary to *Exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures,* yet becomes more focused in terms of exegesis and application. Designed for the maturing student of Scripture, the study aims at enabling one to understand the New Testament in its original setting and at making appropriate application in the modern age. Assuming that spiritual maturity rests upon good interpretation, the course presents basic principles of interpretation and offers hands-on experience with exegesis.

The Greek Scriptures (*i.e.,* the New Testament) consist of 27 separate compositions authored by nine or ten men (with the author of Hebrews uncertain). The apostle Paul produced the larger number of these, but Luke's two books (The Gospel of Luke and Acts of Apostles) occupy more space (if Hebrews is excluded from the Pauline corpus) and cover a longer period. Each composition makes use of conventional vocabulary and writing forms current in the 1st century. Each of these works employs language and literary form to accomplish a specific theological purpose.

One may ask, Why is it necessary to have a course on how to study the New Testament? Is the New Testament not written for the common person? We certainly would not take issue with the idea that the New Testament is designed for the common person. Neither would we venture that this course is essential to understanding its content. We would only offer that the course has the potential of sharpening a person's reading skill, focusing attention, steering away from untenable conclusions, and helping with intended application.

Laid out in four modules, the initial module considers principles that guide interpretation of various literary genre found in the New Testament. Modules 2-4 take samples of the New Testament corpus and examine features to illustrate the interpretative process.

MODULE 1 Interpreting the New Testament

The Bible exists as a literary work. It is not *simply* literature, but it *is literature*. Consequently, literary rules apply when seeking meaning from its pages. From a general perspective, written communication is done through words and forms of writing. The words are symbols that point to concepts and ideas. These words become a means by which one person conveys to another person information regarding events, subjects, emotions, or thoughts.

Vocabulary is important only to the degree that it accomplishes the intentions of the writer. The author selects the words he believes will communicate his thought. It may be a common word that conveys popularly understood concepts. When he has an idea to communicate but finds no common word adequate to express the minute detail, he may select a common word and then sharpen its meaning by description or context. A good example of this is John 1:1, where *logos* is given new meaning. A biblical writer does not create vocabulary, for he is writing in standard Greek. But he may extend the meaning. With the John 1:1 passage, the author is not content to define the term as "word" or even define it in purely philosophical terms. He is making a new application about a unique event in that Jesus is the "word" in a sense unknown previously. The definition of the term begins with the root and common meaning; it reaches full understanding from the context.

Literary structure provides a framework for words to function. Words stand in relation to other words in a syntax that is understood by both the writer and the reader. It is as important for modern readers to understand the vocabulary and sentence structure as it was for the original reader, although translators perform this service for the modern person.

If you have taken Exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures, you will find some overlap, but that should be expected. The former course deals with genre that is most prominent in the *Hebrew* Scriptures. This course concentrates on genre that dominates the *Greek* Scriptures.

So, let it be established that the New Testament is literature and, as such, is to be interpreted through the conventions of writing. Beyond this, the contents of the New Testament are theological in tone and should not be considered mere history or speculative philosophy. The message is from God, but precisely how divine inspiration worked in producing the compositions remains a mystery. Humans sometimes force an explanation, but it is wise to leave some things to God.

The module contains three units. These are (1) The Science of Interpretation, (2) Principles of Interpretation, and (3) Exegesis and Exposition.

Unit 1. The Science of Interpretation

In speaking of the "science" of interpretation, the emphasis is on knowledge as an end result. The implication is that the approach to studying Scripture should be systematic and organized for the purpose of achieving correct meaning.

General rules of interpretation apply for both the Old and the New Testaments. However, literary forms differ between the testaments and deserve special treatment. Unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament is almost all narrative (*i.e.,* written in story form), with little composed in poetic structure (*i.e.,* written in verse). The poetic pieces tend to be songs or quotes from the Old Testament or hymn fragments embedded within narrative. More significantly, however, the “narrative” portions of the New Testament introduce distinct literary forms that should not be confused with secular history writing or storytelling.

Even the general forms of history and apocalyptic are theological in content and purpose. In addition to these common forms, the New Testament offers genre known as *Gospels* and *Epistles*. Gospels comprise a novel form of writing tied to the presentation of Jesus Christ. Other than later compositions that were patterned after them, they are unique.

Epistles, of course, are letters. They are similar to those that commonly circulated in the ancient world. The special nature of epistles as *biblical* literature lies in their purpose. Letters are recorded in the Old Testament in the form of decrees, reports, and memoranda (cf. Ezra 5-6), but their purpose differs from the epistolary literature of the New Testament. In the New Testament, letters are written to both groups and individuals and contain instruction, correction, and encouragement pegged to the gospel.

The unit has three sections. They are titled (a) The interpretive process, (b) Language tools, and (c) Analogous assistance. Once these topics have been treated, attention will be drawn to principles involved with interpretation.

a. The interpretative process. The science of interpretation is called "hermeneutics." Hermeneutics describes the practice of explaining a text, following sound and proven principles. In the broader, classical sense, it covers both exegesis and application. In a narrower since, hermeneutics is a complement to exegesis. While exegesis is, strictly speaking, concerned with getting the meaning of the original author for his primary audience, hermeneutics is specifically concerned with finding the meaning of the ancient text for the modern reader.

Some biblical passages appear to have imparted information as their primary goal. Other passages make a strong appeal for action on the part of the readers. From a biblical perspective, the reception of information is only the first phase of a two-phase process. Hearing and understanding the gospel brings one to the act of decision (phase two). The intent of the entire New Testament is to call people to action based on truth.

Establishing a beginning point. Our interest lies in both exegesis and hermeneutics. We want to do proper exegesis so we can make proper application in our own time. So, at the outset, we need to build a framework for understanding the task.

Three possible starting points face us. One, we could begin with the *author* as the determiner of meaning. Two, we could let the *text* be the determiner of meaning and disregard what the author may have had in mind. Or, three, we could allow the *reader* to determine the meaning of the text in question. If the *author* alone becomes the one who determines meaning, then one is faced with the impossible task of knowing fully what the author had in mind. More speculation would be generated about what the author intended but did not specifically write than with what he actually wrote. On the other hand, if the *text* is the only source, then what the author wrote on other occasions or what was said by others about the author, or what is written elsewhere in scripture could not be admitted as an aid in interpretation. In recent times, an emphasis has been upon the *reader* as one who determines the meaning. But pure reader response can eliminate any inherent textual meaning and leave interpretation to the whims of the human reader. Yet, if the modern reader is eliminated from the equation, then one must face the possibility that the ancient text has little or nothing to say to moderns. Would it be safe to say that each component has a role to play? Yes, the three elements must work in concert.

Reflection. Consider the consequences of allowing the author, the text, or the modern reader to determine the meaning of a biblical passage. Think about the following questions.

1. If a text has "meaning," where should one begin to find it?
2. What implication does a "translation" have on finding the meaning of a text?
3. How does one deal with the "intent" of the author when his meaning is unclear from the text?
4. How does one deal with a "text" when the author expresses himself differently in another book or another author assumes a slightly different posture?
5. How does one deal with a modern reader who insists that the text is speaking directly to him/her, but it is apparent that the interpretation is out of context?

Activity. Open your Bible to Matt. 26:59-61. Assume that you, the reader, are a confirmed unbeliever. You are looking for ways to discount the text. Would you be inclined to say that Matthew inserted the idea that the Sanhedrin's search for evidence was Matthew's way of discrediting the Sanhedrin? Would you not say that Matthew had an agenda and was writing to promote his own opinion? If you are an objective student, how would you go about discovering the real intent of the text? Why would Matthew have included the note about the Sanhedrin's search for "false evidence" and use of "false witnesses"? Discover the difference it would make (1) if you assume the text gave an

accurate report, (2) if you assume the author distorted the events to convey some contrived meaning, and (3) if you assume a personalized meaning apart from the context.

b. Language tools. Words are symbols for conveying thoughts from one person to another. Therefore, knowing the "precise" meaning of the vocabulary is important to interpretation. Equally important is understanding the context that defines the meaning of words employed. Since words can carry different meanings within different contexts, the interpreter is obliged to discover both the root meanings and the way individual words are used. Additionally, you should remember that when the original text is translated into another language, the translators may not have used a word with the exact equivalency of meaning. For example, when Matthew uses the word "fulfill," he is not using the word as most moderns use it. To assume that a popular definition of a substitute word in another language is the way the original author used it could lead to a flawed understanding.

Recognizing basic elements of language. Interpretation requires one to consider literary genre, vocabulary, meaning, implications, significance, subject matter, norms of language, and context. If this is the case, then interpreting the New Testament appears to be a foreboding task. However, when each of the foregoing elements is taken one at a time, the task becomes more manageable.

Reflection. Consider the following:

1. Become familiar with the vocabulary of hermeneutics: exegesis, exposition, literary genre, meaning, implications, significance, context, and application.
2. How can a word change meaning when found in different contexts?
3. What is the difference between "meaning" and "implication"?

Activity. Look at Matt. 2:13-15. Now consider the meaning of Hosea 11. Center your attention on Matthew's use of the word "fulfill." Resist defining the word as "prediction" and see if you can figure out what Matthew means when he says, "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" If Matthew is not misusing a passage, then he must be using it in a way that is somewhat unique to our standard use of "fulfill."

c. Analogous assistance. Beyond language itself, other tools prove helpful in the interpretative process. Among these are word studies, commentaries, theologies, sermons, scholarly articles, and the Bible in various translations. Word studies offer the root meaning of original terms and sometimes show shades of difference when used in multiple contexts.

Commentaries can provide a vital service, but their use calls for discernment. Ideally, commentaries should be consulted after the student has exhausted his/her own personal study of the biblical text. Commentaries may be simple or technical. They may be objective or biased. A good commentary is one that is understandable, complete, and fair in treatment.

Theologies are a bit more risky, as they themselves are an interpretation of the composite of biblical references. Theology comes out of exegesis; it does not *inform* exegesis. Nonetheless, it can become a check for the interpreter.

Sermons are also built on exegesis. Their strength is in application.

Scholarly articles are often in more depth than other helps. A good article can render an exhaustive review of the literature, summarize historical interpretations, and offer in-depth analysis.

Translations can give you the best judgment of scholars as to how to capture the thought in the receptor language.

The Holy Spirit. The role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible is difficult to define. While giving proper credit to the Spirit, extremes should be avoided. First, one should avoid a position that renders the human element totally absent from the process. Human authors were employed and were evidently

allowed to make choices on what to include and exclude and how to approach their material. The Gospels are a case in point. Second, avoid the position that the Spirit had nothing to do with the texts. This leaves the writers to their own fallacies. A third extreme to avoid is a tendency to credit the Spirit with giving people personal, often contradictory, interpretations. Fourth, the work of the Spirit should not be equated with tradition.

Reflection. Consider the following study questions.

1. How would you respond when two people claim that the Holy Spirit has shown them the meaning of a text, but their views are contradictory?
2. Could the Holy Spirit have had a part in inspiring biblical writers while allowing them to contradict each other?
3. Could the Holy Spirit have had a part in inspiring biblical writers while allowing them to choose their own thoughts and words to express them?
4. Could the Holy Spirit have had a part in inspiring biblical writers while allowing them to use their own language skills, or lack thereof, in writing the Bible?

Unit 2. Principles of Interpretation

Differences in genre make specific rules necessary for interpreting any written composition. When you read a newspaper, for example, you understand the difference between a news piece, an editorial, an advertisement, a classified ad, and a comic strip. You expect different things from each. Each belongs to a distinctive “genre" (literary type), which requires discernment. So it is with the Bible. Understanding different genre is essential for getting the intended meaning from biblical texts.

The biblical text is filled with a wide array of genre, including prophecy, poetry, parable, proverb, prayer, treaty, law, song, Gospels, and apocalypse. Some of these were considered earlier in Exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Each literary genre used in the New Testament has unique characteristics. Distinct principles or rules of interpretation may be needed. Keep in mind that “rules” are created by moderns as they examine ancient texts. The original writers assumed their readers knew how to interpret their content since they were in accord with standard conventions of writing. No doubt, early initial readers understood the genre sufficiently to interpret the text.

It is the genre that makes the rules of interpretation necessary. The rules are there to aid discovery, not to force interpretation. The rules involved in understanding prophecy, for example, will not be the same as those used to interpret a parable. All genres have a common goal--communication. The differences come from the means used to communicate complementary ideas.

Prerequisite to correct interpretation is an honest and unbiased quest. Honesty will not guarantee reaching a correct conclusion. But ignorance of genre can prevent you from reaching a correct assessment of a passage.

Before proceeding, let us define the "principles" of which we speak. Actually, we will keep in mind two distinct uses of the term. First, the term is taken to mean "the rules governing interpretation." Second, the word may refer to the "rule that a particular passage exemplifies" or "a rule that may be drawn from a passage." In the first instance, the application is *to the act of gaining the inherent meaning*. In the second instance, the application is to the rule that the passage itself generates. The first is employed in this unit; the second applies to application, which shall be more fully addressed in Module 3.

The unit is divided into three parts. These are (a) Principles for interpreting biblical narrative, (b) Interpreting prophecy, and (c) Interpreting parables.

a. Principles for interpreting biblical narrative. Narrative is the most frequently found literary genre in the New Testament. The Gospel writers used narrative to craft the story of Jesus. Narrative brings together discourses, conversations, travels, miracles, quotations, and other elements to carry the story of Jesus from a point of introduction to the climax intended by the author. In this sense, narrative is the glue that holds separate, unrelated events together. It creates meaning out of isolated elements.

Luke employed narrative in Acts of Apostles to tell the story of the early church. He too relates incidents that have no apparent connection and makes a purpose-driven composition. The events have little meaning without the narrative that integrates them and ties them to a common goal. In Acts, the author is able to tell a story that has served believers for twenty centuries.

When you think of the New Testament epistles, you do not expect to find the common narrative form. However, there are sections where the author, particularly Paul, will narrate some events that provide background to the message of the epistle. In Galatians, he recounts the story of his travels and talks about challenging the apostle Peter. In First Corinthians, he rehearses the enactment of the Lord's supper.

The interpretation of narrative demands that the interpreter give close attention to the material. Themes, vocabulary, background notations, and quoted material will all play an important role in shaping the narrative. The various elements function much like a symphony for conveying the author's message. They are essential to the author's ability to tell his story. Consequently, the interpreter is obliged to take these matters into account when reading biblical narrative.

The uniqueness of biblical narrative. As we have stressed before, the Bible conforms to literary conventions. But the Bible's purpose and content are theological. Not only is the Bible theological, it reports supernatural events.

The Enlightenment introduced skepticism with regard to the supernatural. By discounting the miraculous, Enlightenment thinking influenced the development of three alternative approaches to interpretation. One is to seek the meaning behind the miracle which the text reported (rational). A second is to acknowledge that the authors were merely accommodating an audience who believed in miracles (accommodation). The third is to seek meaning in myths that the authors allegedly used when clothing religious ideas with historical garb.

Truly, the Bible has little significance if its contents are fabricated or if constructed on myth or if it carries no enduring message. Affirming the text to be accurate in what it records is the first step toward interpretation. Then one should seek meaning as revealed in the event the biblical author recalls. Yet, the meaning of a text will not be found in the event itself, but in what the biblical author seeks to teach by retelling the event. That being the case, myth and historical inaccuracies could conceivably be admitted, if the author so treats his material. But not so if the author considers his citations and allusions as actual occurrences.

Context. Since every narrative text is part of a larger unit, the interpreter must deal with the smaller unit as part of the whole book. But one must also be aware that the whole is comprised of smaller units, which contribute to the meaning of a unified composition. Even then, individual books are part of larger units (*e.g.,* The Gospels) or the whole biblical canon.

The author's methodology. In building his narrative, the author has used some criteria for selecting his material--availability, accuracy, purpose, space, etc. He has chosen literary genre--Gospel, epistle, apocalyptic. He has made use of citations and determined how they are to be interpreted--as prophetic or illustrative. And he has decided on order--as in the Gospels.

Occasionally, the author of a biblical book added comments intended to guide the reader. This may happen when a foreign word is used or it may be in the form of a summary statement. The repetition of key themes often signals direction and meaning. The reader is cautioned against identifying words or concepts on the sole basis of word counts or his own predisposition. Indirect or direct discourse provides

still another clue to meaning. Especially if the discourse contains a question, there may be a very significant meaning intended.

Activity. To make sure you understand the nature of biblical narrative, write out the answers to the questions below.

1. In your own words, what is narrative?

2. How does “biblical narrative” differ from any other kind of narrative?

3. What are some indicators that a biblical author gives to indicate that he intends for the reader to interpret his material as historical narrative?

4. How would you define "context" for a biblical passage?

5. What is the process by which a writer of biblical narrative may interject something to help the reader?

Now, study through the following passages. Identify the key elements indicated to see how they influence interpretation.

Context: Romans 4
Authorial comments: Mark 15:21-35
Repetition: The Holy Spirit in Luke 1-4
Authoritative speakers: Luke 23:50-53
Dialogue or direct discourse: Mark 4:35-41

b. Interpreting prophecy. If you have taken Exegesis of the Old Testament, you have been introduced to prophetic literature. But here, the perspective is slightly new. You are looking at prophecy from the New Testament point of view, where the prophetic role has been more narrowly defined.

Often, in the Old Testament, one must search later history to find if a prophecy has been fulfilled. When some of these Old Testament prophecies are referenced in the New Testament, the historical event that would mark the fulfillment of a prophetic passage is wrapped in events that are explained theologically. The purpose of prophecy is not merely to tell of some coming event. It should not be used simply to prove the Bible correct. Prophetic messages are intended to reveal God’s concern for humanity. Use of fulfilled prophecy for apologetics may have its place, but this is not the primary purpose of prophecy.

The prophetic setting. Two different circumstances govern the interpretation of prophecy in the New Testament. First, there are prophetic utterances found in the Old Testament, which a New Testament writer declares has been fulfilled. Second, there are those prophecies, which appear first in a New Testament work, which have some future application.

When examining the work of the prophets in the Old Testament, one meets an array of activity. The prophet was defined as one who called Israel back to covenant loyalty, as one who interpreted Israel’s plight, as one who warned Israel and the nations of impending judgment, and as one who revealed God’s vision for the future. If this broad definition were used in the New Testament setting, it might include the entire canon. However, we shall employ a much narrower definition in our study of New Testament prophecy.

The role of prophet in the New Testament. Jesus himself can easily be placed among the prophets, inasmuch as he assumed a prophetic role. It would be a mistake, however, to consider him only as a prophet, for he assumed other roles as well: Messiah, Savior, High Priest, etc. As a prophet, Jesus declared the good news of God’s redemption, called the people to faith, and declared future events.

Specifically, in the New Testament, the term “prophet” is employed for a distinctive group of people--both men and women. Agabus is noted as one of several prophets present when he foretold a famine (Acts

11:27). Prophets are mentioned along with apostles, evangelists, and pastors and teachers as persons who had received gifts that would enable them to nurture the church (Eph. 4:11-13). Paul recognizes the gift of prophecy in an expanded list of gifts, where the gift is specifically linked with the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7-10; cf. Rom. 12:6). Women were also known to posses the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:4-5).

The "fulfillment" of Old Testament prophetic passages. Perhaps the first matter to clarify is this: the word prophecy is not synonymous with prediction. There were many prophetic utterances in the Old Testament that did not contain any word about future events. In fact, only a small portion of the message of the prophets contained prediction of some coming event.

Another important concept is that not all New Testament references to a passage having been "fulfilled" suggest that the original was a mere prediction. Let us emphasize that the key lies in the meaning of the word "fulfill" as used in the biblical text. Here is one instance where the English word "fulfill" fails to represent the Greek word adequately and, consequently, often leaves the wrong impression on the reader. If the reader understands the biblical text based on his/her own language and not in terms of the Greek, then a wrong conclusion can be drawn.

Predictive prophecy in the New Testament. Since our modern categories of classifying genre are artificial, some boundaries must be established. As suggested earlier, one could easily use the Jewish meaning of "The Prophets" (those who speak for God in presenting Yahweh's prophetic history) for the entire New Testament. However, when those New Testament utterances that contain an element of prediction are considered, they may be grouped into three categories. One category may be identified with Jesus' comments about the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21), his impending death (Matt. 12:40; 20:18-19, etc.), and his resurrection (Matt. 26:32). A second category includes prediction of personal and immediate events, such as Jesus' foretelling of Judas' betrayal (Matthew 26:23) and Peter's denial (Matt. 26:34), Agabus' prediction of a famine (Acts 11:27-28), and other passages that indicate similar activity (Acts 21:4ff.). Category three includes those numerous references which speak of approaching evil days, the second coming of Christ, and the judgment (Matt. 13:41-43; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; 2 Thess. 2:1-4; 2 Pet. 3; Revelation).

Notice the different settings in which prophecy occurs. An utterance may appear in the midst of a parable, be a straightforward prediction, come from the hand of an apostolic writer, or be cast in apocalyptic.

Principles governing the interpretation of prophecy. Below are listed general principles for interpreting prophecy, especially from a New Testament perspective. The principles may have specific application in some instances, yet not in others.

1. Determine the nature of the prophetic utterance. Is the prophetic word conditioned upon certain things happening, or is it unconditional? The conditional element may be more visible in the Old Testament than in the New. For example, the destruction of Nineveh foretold by Jonah was averted because the citizens repented. Obviously, the famine that Agabus predicted came, for the text acknowledged its occurrence. But should prophecies about evil days be a foregone conclusion? Were the predictions given as a warning to those who were evil, a warning to those who were faithful, assurance to the faithful that the evil people would get their due, or a simple statement of fact? How one reads may determine what kind of application one makes for his/her own life. To read the statement as a mere fact will hardly impact the reader's life. To read the statement as an illustration of the consequences of good and evil may provoke a sober, confident faith within the reader.

2. Look for the implications of prophecy. The statement by Jesus that Peter would deny him is clear. What is less clear is the meaning of the rooster's crowing. One should seek understanding of the nature of rooster crowing and the differences between the Gospel accounts as an aside. The obvious message of the statement by Jesus is that Peter would soon deny him. The event may not have been crucial to the outcome of Jesus' trial, but it did have implications for Peter and for all who seek faith.

3. Discern the language of prophecy. The interpretation of Joel 2 by Luke in Acts 2 should be made in

light of the language. Joel employed graphic cosmic language to describe God's future work. When interpreting the passage in keeping with the Pentecost event, one should not seek a literal display of cosmic disruptions but a profound statement about divine activity at Pentecost.

4. Understand the vocabulary of the interpreter. One key to understanding prophecy is to look carefully at the vocabulary. In Matthew, for example, the word "fulfill" carries more the idea of providing "fuller meaning" than the consummation of a prediction.

5. Look for explanations provided by the author. In Acts, Luke declares that what happened on Pentecost was in keeping with Joel's words. Matthew says the virgin birth gives a fuller meaning to Isaiah's words to the unfaithful King Ahaz. A unique situation comes with the passage in Matthew that identifies Jesus as a Nazarene. Here, one finds a play on words, rather than the specific fulfillment of a prediction. In Revelation, terms are often identified within the text itself. And characterizations may change quickly, as Jesus may be presented as both a lion and a lamb. One should seek out first the meaning the author implied.

In interpreting New Testament prophecy, the interpreter begins with the statements of New Testament authors. Your task is to understand what the authors are saying and how their pronouncements fit into the entire scheme of things. Surely, application will be forthcoming. You are obliged to make certain that application is in keeping with the biblical message. Avoid making unintended application, as well as a lack of application.

Activities. Now, let us see if you can use the principles outlined.

1. Hosea and Matthew. Examine Hosea 11 in your Bible. Determine the subject and the message of the text. Do you see any "predictive" element in the passage? If so, where? Now turn to Matt. 2:13-15. How does Matthew treat the text of Hosea?

2. Isaiah and Matthew. Using the same process as above, examine Isa. 7:1-8:4. Pay special attention to the person addressed (7:13-14), what was predicted and when it would happen (7:14-16), and the results (8:1-4). Turn to Matt. 1:21-23. As with the Hosea passage above, it is easy to see that Matthew's concept of "fulfill" is something other than simple predictive prophecy. He fills it to the fullest meaning possible.

3. Joel and Acts. Open your Bible to Joel 2. What is the circumstance that calls for an army of locusts? What call goes out to Israel following the devastation (v. 13)? What will God do in the future (vv. 28-32)? How does the author of Acts interpret Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:14-21)?

4. Jeremiah and Hebrews. Look at Jer. 31:31-34. Does it sound like God is going to do something specific in the future? Does the prediction have the appearance of being conditioned upon some human act or is it a predetermined act of God? Now turn to Hebrews 8. Does the writer of Hebrews conclude that the prophecy about a new covenant is tied directly to the ministry of Jesus?

c. Interpreting parables. Parables may not constitute a major portion of the New Testament, but they do represent a significant form of Jesus' teaching. In terms of application, parables provide opportunity for the teacher to explain spiritual realities. They also offer a good model for teaching all vital themes related to the gospel. But the art of teaching with the use of parables must be cultivated. A parable is not a joke or a funny story. It is a serious description of something that is "like" the truth being taught.

An introduction to the parables. The word "parable" in English may reflect a host of intended meanings, including puzzle, riddle, story, parallel account. Technically, a true parable may be a story with a plot. However, the parables of Jesus sometimes simply state a similarity between common elements such as light and the behavior of a disciple. Even allegory may be suggested in the interpretation, but the allegory must be evident within the interpretation provided by Jesus. Parables are themselves not allegories.

While the word "parable" is quite inclusive of a genre of literature, the parables of Jesus differ among themselves. They may take the form of a metaphor or simile. The parables of the New Testament differ

among themselves somewhat in structure. They are all intended to teach, but they may not take the same form. Perhaps it is better to think of the parables of the Gospels as a literary category rather than a specific medium of instruction.

The parables of Jesus became a means by which Jesus provided insight into spiritual realities. Their purpose was (and continues to be) enlightenment by way of illustration. For those in Jesus' audience whose hearts were not receptive to his teaching, the parables became, ironically, a means by which unbelievers were confirmed in unbelief.

The simplicity of parables suggests easy interpretation. Yet, historically, the parables of Jesus have met with the same response as they did when they were first spoken. Some people heard readily, while others just did not get the point. Some were refreshed by them; others responded with sadness or anger. What would seem to be a simple lesson sometimes gets lost in elaborate allegory.

Although Jesus used parables to teach, the hearers often needed assistance in explanation. This is borne out in Jesus' discussion with his disciples. Sometimes he would speak a parable and the disciples would be baffled. Jesus would then explain the parable to them. Whether they were blind to their own biases or whether the parable was simply out of reach for them produced the same result.

Parables can be easily misunderstood or not understood at all. However, the mystery of the parables is not intended to discourage their study. To say they are allegorical mysteries is to stretch them into something they were never intended to be. To say their inmost meaning can be understood only by a spiritual guru is certainly not the point. By their nature, parables were spoken to illustrate and clarify.

Story parables are intended to provoke a response. That response presupposes that the hearer connects with the various elements of the story. The particulars of the parable, therefore, must be familiar. They do not need explanation. The end of the story becomes the point and is self-evident to the hearer.

Originally spoken, the parables of the New Testament are now written. In the original spoken setting, the response was immediate. People who heard took note of what was implied. They reacted to what Jesus had said. A clear line of demarcation separated believers and unbelievers. Sometimes Jesus would use a parable to condemn wrong attitudes; at other times, he would employ it to picture an ideal.

Guidelines for interpreting parables

1. A parable teaches a basic point. The temptation in parable interpretation is to find more in the parable than was originally intended. Premature application can skew the honest meaning and true interpretation. Elements of the parable are mere building block. They provide the substance of the parable but are not necessarily with meaning on their own.

2. Ask, What was the point Jesus sought to make? Jesus is the author of the parables. Discovering his meaning should be paramount. Interpretation begins with the context in which the parable is placed within the text.

3. Ask, What was the point the evangelist sought to make? Would one not expect the author of a Gospel to make the same point as did Jesus? Yes. However, it should be borne in mind that the writers of the Gospels were relating the parables in such a way as to reach new and different audiences. The inherent meaning of the parable may not change, but new applications may have been made by the evangelists. Do not look for opposing points with the parables, but be aware that the evangelists' audiences may differ from those of Jesus. The first task in interpreting a parable is to catch the climax aimed at the original hearers.

4. Ask what reason the author of the Gospel may have had for including the parable. If we assume the Gospel was addressed to the Christian community some thirty years after Jesus spoke it, what point would that audience have understood? Here, possibly, the Gospel writer put the parable in a new context designed for the reader. If so, we have three questions to answer. One, What was the point of the

parable as originally crafted by Jesus? What was the point of the parable for the maturing Christian community? And, what meaning does the parable hold for me, my contemporaries, and the modern church? Whatever disposition you may have for this thought, keep in mind that to call for a totally new application can have damaging results for the integrity of the Gospel author's representation of Jesus' own words. The burden of claiming Gospel writers altered Jesus' original statements to adapt them to a later audience goes beyond the boundary of responsible interpretation.

5. Pay attention to the context. In all situations, the modern interpreter is obliged to note the particulars of the context. What was happening in the original context? Who actually comprised the original audience? What kind of reaction did the parable evoke? In determining the audience, one should look at the specific references as to who is being addressed and to the content of the parable itself. Perhaps the audience is identified by the introductory remarks and perhaps by the elements of the parable. For example, the parable of the Two Debtors (Luke 7:41-42) was expressed to the host of a meal to which Jesus had been invited. Simon, a Pharisee, had simply wondered in his mind about the validity of Jesus when he allowed a sinful woman to anoint his feet. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) was uttered in response to a question raised by a legal expert, who represented the Jewish leaders. Then, within the parable itself, contrast is made between two religious types (priest and Levite), who were bad examples against a despised Samaritan, who was a good example. Time does not change exegesis; application draws from exegesis and shows the relevance of a passage to a present audience. One is not justified in identifying the application first and then searching for some way to apply the Bible to the desired outcome.

The audience in other parables may be more difficult to identify with certainty. In these cases, cautious speculation is needed. In the ongoing list of parables contained in Matthew 13, the recipients were the "crowds" that came to hear Jesus at Galilee, with explanations given to the disciples. The interplay is between the crowds and the disciples (Matt. 13:2, 10 and 34, 36). Precisely who composed the crowds is not always clear. In saying that cleanness is a condition of the heart rather than the result of eating, Jesus offended the Pharisees, who were part of the crowd. Presumably, the crowds contained a mixture of people. They probably held a variety of attitudes.

The series of parables in Luke 15 is addressed to Pharisees and teachers of the law who were muttering against Jesus. Jesus had been criticized for welcoming sinners. He responded with parables that demonstrated the joy of reclaiming what had been lost. Clearly, the Pharisees bore the blunt of the parables, but more than condemnation was intended. The larger value of spiritual reclamation was shown to be superior to spiritual exclusiveness. As for hermeneutics, the value of identifying the audience is seeing ourselves in the behavior of others. In some parables, the ambiguous audience is focused on the reader. For instance, the Parable of the Laborers (Matt. 20:1-16) denounces an attitude of jealousy over who receives a gracious gift.

6. With respect to the parables of the kingdom, it should be noted that the likeness portrayed between physical elements and the kingdom is a likeness of character. Hence, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed in the sense that it behaves like a mustard seed. The entire parable must be considered to see the implied comparison. Many of the kingdom parables imply an urgency, because the kingdom is at hand.

Activities. With the principles outlined above, work at interpreting the parables below. Be sure you do not discover more in the parable than is intended. Look for the meaning within the context of the passage. Write out what you think is the main point of each and what you believe to be the application of each for the modern reader.

1. The parable of the wise and foolish maidens (Matt. 25:1-13)
2. The parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30)
3. The parable of the man who discovered hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44)
4. The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)
5. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32)
6. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16)

7. The parable of the lost sheep (Matt. 18:10-14; Luke 15:1-7

Some scholars are of the opinion that the Gospel writers used Jesus' parables to establish their own teachings. While there may be some room for adaptation by the Gospel writers, one should be careful with this approach. It is a step toward discrediting the words of Jesus. And if the words attributed to Jesus are used by the authors in an indiscriminate manner, then the actual teaching of Jesus will be lost.

Unit 3. Exegesis and Exposition

With "exegesis" and "exposition," we simply wish to convey the idea that the modern student of Scripture should be concerned with two tasks when handling Scripture. The first is to draw out the meaning that reflects the author's original intent. The second is to make application in the modern setting that the biblical text will support.

Exegesis is nearly a forgotten art in the modern age. Typically, a biblical passage will be read, and then exposition begins immediately. In an attempt to milk a passage for all it is worth, the expositor may forsake the goal the author had in mind and flit about as if to find a hidden treasure in every word. He may tease his curiosity by asking about remote details and attempt to put some theological twist on every sentence. He may feel obliged to make application when one was not intended. Sound exegesis precedes exposition.

Exegesis is about discovery—but not the kind described above. The exegete wants to know what the author meant by the words he actually wrote. To discover the meaning makes him aware of the use of words within context. If words and thoughts are to be isolated, let that occur after seeing the big picture.

When analyzing the New Testament, one may discover a variety of literary genre embedded within four basic composition forms. These forms are Gospel, Acts, Epistle, and Apocalypse. These four are the vehicles used by 1st century writers to convey the substance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are unique in their own way, yet they partake of common literary structures. In Unit 2, we looked briefly at some specific genre--narrative, prophecy, and parable. In Unit 3, our attention is drawn to the four composition forms. We break the discussion into three sections: (a) The Gospel and Acts, (b) Interpreting the Epistles, and (c) Interpreting The Apocalypse.

a. The Gospels and Acts. At first glance, the four Gospels and Acts of Apostles appear to be very different literary pieces. Indeed, there are significant distinctions, which include times and subjects. Nevertheless, Acts is the second volume of a two-volume composition. In some respects, Acts functions as a fifth Gospel. It carries forward the story of the Gospel of Luke to show what happened to the story of Jesus three decades beyond Jesus' commission to his apostles.

The Gospels. The Gospels may be four in number, but they present one story. This story has many dimensions. Several questions await treatment by the interpreter. What is the literary nature of the Gospels? How should one deal with similar sayings or episodes when they appear to have different historical contexts? To what extent did the various authors mold the original sayings to fit their immediate audiences? How should one make application of the Gospels to modern situations? For some, this last question is especially critical because Jesus lived under the dispensation of the Law of Moses.

Keep in mind that the situation that called for the writing of a composition governs interpretation to some extent. So does the literary context, which relates to the historical context. In other words, the story of Jesus is wrapped in the circumstances of his time and presented by the author of the composition for his own audience. Now, *we* must take the basic story forward two millennia without distorting it.

Acts. As with the Gospels, the interpreter faces two important questions with respect to Acts of Apostles. Both questions pertain to the nature of the material. Does Acts represent an old or new genre? And, what was the intended purpose of the composition? The task of application lies beyond exegesis. In this

regard, some people see in Acts a blueprint for the church. Others are content to pick and choose what they wish as a prescription for Christian behavior. The haunting question that confronts the interpreter is, What rules the hermeneutical process to guarantee that the intended meaning and use of Acts will be achieved?

In a sense Acts is "history." It mentions historical places and treats its personalities as real people with actual life experiences. However, Acts is not *mere* history. It does more than fill the curious mind with stories about people, places, and events. The particular items mentioned serve a purpose. The author controls the facts he wants his readers to know. The facts are included only because they are important to the story he is telling, the purpose of his story, and/or the application he intends his readers to make.

A place to begin is with analyzing the natural divisions of the book, searching for Luke's purpose, and an exegetical sampling. While it would be improper to separate the several concerns which the author had for Acts, is it possible that one overriding concern actually compelled him to write at the time he did? What do you think it was?

When it is not easy to decide on a definite central occasion or purpose, the composition should be interpreted in keeping with the cluster of concerns presented in the work itself. These "govern" the exegesis and keep the student honest.

Guidelines for applying Acts. The appropriate application of Acts should be suggested by the author himself. Keep asking yourself the question, Is the author telling me something that should be implemented in the present time? How do I determine what is to be brought into modern times and what is to be left behind? How can I determine the difference between a "background note," a "principle," an "illustration," and a "command"? When the author notes that John Mark left Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:13; 15:38), is he stating a fact? Is he implying that Christians have a right to disagree? Is he suggesting that some sort of loyalty test be introduced for missionaries? Perhaps he is simply explaining why Paul and Barnabas separated.

Normally, a *principle* will surface within the story. The principle that Christians should remain loyal to the Lord though they may face difficult persecution seems evident from the book. An act of Christian generosity may be *illustrated,* as with the case of the early disciples and Barnabas. A continuing *command* becomes evident with the instructions from the Jerusalem Conference leaders, for this instruction went out to all the churches (Acts 15:22-29). Here are some general principles for making application of Acts.

1. Look to the Scriptures themselves rather than to your own thoughts for guidance on what should be appropriated into modern situations.
2. Examine passages to discover the intent of the author.
3. Be content to allow what is incidental to the text to remain incidental in modern application.
4. Discern from historical precedent only what is normative for all Christians.

b. Interpreting the Epistles. The epistles are letters that entail personal communication between one party and another. Their form reflects that of the common letter. Often, but not always, the composition begins with an address and ends with a closing that was customary in the 1st century. In short, the Epistles look more like letters than short stories, poems, or other forms of literary production.

But the Epistles are not just ordinary letters. They are "special" letters. The Epistles of the New Testament are set apart from other literature in several ways. First, they come to us as "inspired" letters. They represent more than a simple interest in conveying information from one private party to another. They have universal appeal.

Second, the Epistles contain unique content. While often personal in tone, they contain instruction in spiritual matters. Theological ideas separate them from letters with secular interests. Admonition given by the author to the recipients is based on a strong theological base in which faith is an overriding concern.

While it would be improper to separate the several concerns which an author may have had in writing, it is possible that one pressing need actually compelled him to write at the time he did. When it is not easy to decide on a definite central occasion or purpose, an epistle should be interpreted in keeping with the cluster of concerns presented in the epistle itself. These "govern" the exegesis and keep the student from providing his own agenda for the epistle.

Interpretation of an epistle prompts one to look within the composition for common themes and purposes for writing. In some cases, the author reveals himself. In other cases, he does not. Sometimes the target audience is identified; at other times, it is not. As interesting and helpful as this information may be, it is not essential to correct interpretation. And, furthermore, knowing such facts may not be the end in itself. Application to one's life is always the primary goal. But solid exegesis of the epistle precedes correct application.

Principles for interpreting the Epistles. Principles pertaining to the interpretation of an epistle may appear to follow closely those used to interpret any kind of letter. However, there are differences, especially in the matter of universal application.

1. The epistles represent a varied collection. Some are very personal; others look more like theological treatises. But they have much in common. The elements common to most epistles are the disclosure of the author, the addressee(s), a greeting, a prayer or thanksgiving, a main body, and a benediction. Variations occur from this general standard in keeping with the nature of each letter. Some elements may be missing altogether, while some are amplified. You should keep in mind that the epistles are occasional documents. They were composed in response to a given circumstance. As you read an epistle, look for some indication of the occasion that evoked it.

2. The letters of the New Testament were formulated within an historical context. Not only does the author respond to a particular circumstance, he is also part of history. The author resides in a particular place and reflects situations in which he himself is involved. Passages may prove difficult to understand when the historical context is lost to the modern reader.

3. When you encounter a problem passage, search for the main ideas of the larger segment that surrounds the text. Take what you can know for certain and build on that. Consult commentaries and the assistance of others as you have opportunity, but keep in mind, you bear responsibility for what you conclude. Develop the knack of asking whether the interpretation is justified by the passage.

4. An epistle will also have a literary context. The author writes in paragraphs and develops complete thoughts. He may elaborate on one or more points introduced earlier. He will be following literary conventions of his time. A good way to catch the spirit of the epistle is to read it through several times. Try to determine how the author has broken the epistles into meaningful parts. Look for indications that he is changing the subject or restating it.

5. The vocabulary of scripture is a key to interpretation. The use of words in different contexts can help the interpreter.

6. The meaning of passages is to be found within its larger context and within the bounds of the entire letter. The meaning will also be compatible with the meaning of similar passages in other New Testament compositions, though the passage under review may offer a different dimension.

7. Exegete an epistle in its original context, then apply to modern circumstances. Perhaps it is inevitable that the interpreter will tend to read back into the material understanding that comes from his or her own culture. Working through translation also provides a challenge, as words do not always mean the same from one language to another. And, indeed, words change their meanings over time. The problem of cultural relativity cuts two ways. First, one must read the text from the point of view of the 1st century

setting. Second, the text should be read with a view toward making it relevant to your own life situation. Leave speculation alone.

After careful exegesis, the most relevant question is, What do these texts mean for persons living today? One rule to keep in mind is that a passage cannot mean today what it did not mean then. At best, one can take a "case law" approach. If a similar circumstance exists today, the principle may have application. But one should exercise care so the point is not pressed beyond that which the author designed.

Activities. A few activities have been designed to help you apply the principles you have been studying. These are not exhaustive, but they may be representative of the variety of responses you may get from asking questions of the epistles of the New Testament.

1. Activity: occasion and purpose. The Epistles are "occasional" compositions. Special situations arose that evoked their writing. Sometimes the author makes a rather clear statement as to why he is writing. Examine the following passages: (1) Jude 3-4, (2) 1 Cor. 1:10-11; 7:1, (3) Gal. 1:6-7.

In other instances, the occasion is less obvious and more difficult to determine. Spend time with each of the following epistles and try to identify the occasion that led to their writing or their purpose: (1) Philemon, (2) Hebrews, (3) Colossians.

It may be in the best interest of wisdom to make tentative judgments as to the occasion or purpose of a given epistle, then test your hypothesis. Ordinarily, it is proper to look to the opening lines for hints, as in Jude, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians. But look at Philippians. What do you think was Paul's purpose for writing Philippians? Examine the following passages.

1. Phil. 1:5-9—thanksgiving

2. Phil. 1:12-14—reporting

3. Phil. 1:27-30—encouragement

4. Phil. 3:2-3—warning

5. Phil. 4:2-3--petition

Each of the above passages may suggest a reason for writing. But which is the primary reason? To offer thanksgiving, to provide a status report, to give encouragement, to warn, or to petition? None of these may be a crisis "occasion" which renders a letter necessary. So there may not necessarily be a crisis behind each letter. However, one may ask what relationship each of the various elements has to the overall purpose of the letter.

Activity: audience. Each epistle had a specific audience. The exegete will ask, To whom was this epistle addressed originally? Before attempting any modern application, the reader is obliged to understand the dynamic between the author and the original audience. The only legitimate question to ask of the text will arise from the letter itself. Application will look beyond the facts and seek principles. Examine the following to see what you can tell about the specific audience to whom these letters were written: (1) Philemon, (2) Hebrews, (3) Colossians.

Exegesis and application. As we move to the end of this module, the crowning task is to see how well you can do exegesis. Remember, the task itself is a never-ending process. Our aim is to get started on a life-long quest that allows you to handle the biblical text in a responsible way.

Exegesis and application 1. Select a passage of your own choosing from an epistle and work through it with the above discussion in mind. Give attention to discovering the original message. Look for themes, statements of purpose, and situations addressed.

Now, take the passage you have exegeted and draw from it the applications you believe are legitimate. Keep in mind that the application must be made from the original intent. But also show how the "principles" are to be applied in the cultural context that surrounds you.

Exegesis and application 2. Select a second passage of your own choosing from a second epistle and work through it with the above discussion in mind. Give attention to the same items enumerated under Exegesis and application 1.

Take the passage you have exegeted and draw from it the applications you believe are legitimate.

Exegesis and application 3. Select a third passage of your own choosing from a third epistle and work through it with the above discussion and items in mind.

Take the passage you have exegeted and draw from it the applications you believe are legitimate.

c. Interpreting the Book of Revelation (The Apocalypse). If there is any part of the New Testament which is less understood, it is the apocalyptic sections. Rooted in late Old Testament literature, apocalyptic became a prominent way of communicating vital truths about God. Wrapped in historical events, apocalyptic lifts the veil so one can see God and other forces at work in our world.

Understanding apocalyptic opens new vistas, for no other writing form can do what apocalyptic can do. The lack of understanding of apocalyptic is responsible for an array of improbable theories and speculations. In some cases, the interpretations placed on apocalyptic writings have been dangerous and reckless. The results are often the opposite of what the author of apocalyptic desired.

Through apocalyptic, the speaker or writer was able to convey ideas in more graphic ways than in conventional narrative. While some apocalyptic may be found in the Gospels in Jesus' response to the disciples' question about the destruction of the temple, the most pronounced apocalyptic in the New Testament is found in the Book of Revelation.

Approaches to Revelation have differed so widely that it is hardly a matter of disagreement over a term or passage. The views are so incompatible that one is often bewildered. The aim of this study is to present the work against its literary genre, historical circumstances, and ultimate meaning. The book will be treated in more detail in Module 4, but we shall introduce it generally at this point in the course.

The genre. The Apocalypse stands alone in the New Testament. It is neither "Gospel" nor "Epistle." Yet, it combines elements of both. The Apocalypse fits neither the category of history nor prophecy. And yet, it has a relationship to both. The Apocalypse draws from many forms of writing and blends them into a unique style.

Apocalyptic is a form of writing that was well known in the Jewish world. It flourished during the latter Old Testament period, during the Intertestamental period, and for a century after the New Testament era. This special type of writing serves a unique purpose. The novelty of apocalyptic is its appropriateness for dealing with matters that cannot be expressed in common language. It represents the conflict between powers and forces which are invisible to humans and show how these relate to events that transpire on earth.

The Book of Revelation takes the form of an epistle in its opening chapters, where its remarks are addressed to specific churches. Individual messages are directed to seven churches in Asia Minor. It is clear, however, that the audience is a wider Christian population, especially that of the late 1st and early 2nd centuries.

The core of Revelation, as it is most commonly called in English, is a message which is told in apocalyptic form. It reaches back to the Gospels to press the case for the worthiness of Jesus. Only Jesus is found worthy to take a scroll from God's hand and open it to reveal future events. But its symbolism is steeped

in Old Testament imagery. Its first readers would understand these symbols as well as the use of this form of writing. Signs and symbols convey the magnitude of the drama.

Jesus is both the lamb slain for sins and victorious ruler. Hence, the theme of the Apocalypse is victory made possible by the work and position of Christ. The One who brought redemption as the Messiah is the One whom God placed at his own right hand. The drama features two key personalities--Satan and the reigning Christ. Satan's efforts to control are doomed to failure because God will provide ultimate victory over Satan's power through Jesus Christ. God's judgments show the defeat of Satan and his efforts to defeat righteousness.

Approaching The Apocalypse. Like all books of the Bible, Revelation was not written in a vacuum. Its literary style partakes of current writing forms. Its points of reference were real and historical. Its symbolism had specific connections. Yet, its images are often forms of fantasy.

Perhaps no other type of literature in the Bible is subjected to such diverse interpretation as Revelation. Perhaps the most difficult point to grasp will be the meaning of "fulfillment." Is it always "literal" or can it sometimes signify a principle? How does one read apocalyptic and get its spiritual message without feeling obliged to read it as an account of historical events written prior to their occurrence.

Much of what one gleans from Revelation depends upon how the book is approached. If, for example, one takes the book to have primary application to its original audience, then it follows that the book contains material that would be especially pertinent to that audience. On the other hand, if one understands the book to be a survey of two thousand years of history, one is obligated to wait until history is complete before one can know the meaning of the book. Meanwhile, one who takes this approach speculates about the interpretation. When the speculation proves to be wrong, one's effort prove a waste of time.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation. Set within the closing days of the 1st century, the book reflects the conditions faced by Christians at that time. Heretofore, persecution has largely been inspired by the Jews or local antagonists. But a new day is approaching when Satan is expected to stir up greater trouble for the growing Christian population.

Exegesis begins with identifying the author's intent. In the absence of a precise statement of intent, the interpreter should pick up on hints within the text. For example, when John declares his message to be that "which God gave . . . to show his servants what must soon take place" (Rev. 1:1), he is suggesting that something important to the original readers was being revealed. As the book unfolds, one gets the picture that the people addressed were Christians who faced many uncertain circumstances which could threaten their faith. The specific audience is identified as "the seven churches in the province of Asia" (Rev. 1:4; cf. 1:11). The question as to what God will do to those who have taken the lives of those who have died for the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 6:9-11) is ultimately answered (Rev. 17:6; 20:4). As for the believer, "Let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy" (Rev. 22:11), for the victory over evil has been won and awaits only God's good time.

The opening chapters of The Apocalypse provide the background for what follows in chapter four. Here is where the intended audience is specified--those Christians who constitute seven churches in the western region of present-day Turkey. The symmetry of the section can be seen in the way the Lamb is initially introduced and the partial characteristics are employed in the letters to each of the seven churches.

Following a salutation, the emphasis of the chapter is on the Lamb. The Lamb, Jesus Christ, holds the key to the plight of the believers. Although his ultimate position is not detailed until chapter 5, there is no doubt of his prominent place in the book's message.

Whereas in the epistles, Christological discussion regarding Jesus is theological in tone, here in Revelation it is more practical. As ruler of the church, Jesus comes to the believers and shows his

pleasure and displeasure in what they are doing. His presentation is unmistakable. He holds the authority to act on behalf of the saints, but he also holds them accountable for their conduct.

The recipients of the seven letters share much in common. Their connection with the Lamb is noted in the introductions. They are all related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. What emerges as different is their particular circumstances. Some face persecution. Others have begun to rely upon themselves more than upon God. Still others find themselves being ravaged by false teachers.

Many practical questions are raised by the letters to the seven churches of Asia. With respect to Sardis, one gets the picture that most of the congregation needed reformation. Questions that rise from this situation are numerous. Who is responsible for leading the reformation? What should be the attitude of the more "spiritual" toward those who are less spiritual? How should one continue with a church that is dominantly unspiritual? Then in Laodicea, the questions that arise have to do with continuance in a church that is indifferent. A minority cannot always bring about revival or set the path for reformation.

Revelation employs many images. For the most part, these are drawn from the Old Testament. As they are employed in apocalyptic, they may take on more of a “spiritual” or symbolic meaning than in their original setting.

Symbolic identifications made in the book itself become a key to interpretation of apocalyptic. For example, the dragon of Rev. 12:9 is identified with Satan. The golden lamp stands of Rev. 1:20 are seven churches. Some of these identifications are suggestive, as the harlot of Rev. 17:18 is the great city, which is, undoubtedly, Rome. The precise meaning of the seven stars of Rev. 1:20--is debated even though they are identified as the angels (messengers) of the churches.

The various visions of Revelation should be seen as part of a whole message. While seals, trumpets, and bowls of wrath are presented in somewhat sequential form, they do not necessarily find interpretation along a lineal timeline. They are sequential in that they portray successive messages of warning and judgment upon evil, but no historical time periods are suggested. The subject appears to be the evil work of Satan and God’s ultimate judgment on him and his instruments as they are represented in the civilization of the Roman Empire.

The modern reader constitutes a secondary audience. He/she examines the book within its original setting, then looks for principles that are timeless in application. Those principles center on the victory of Jesus Christ over Satan. But questions raised for contemporary Christians abound. They speak to life with a congregation where the first love has evaporated. They speak to persecution. They speak to detecting teaching that stands in opposition to the truth of God.

Activity. For some experience in interpreting a different type of prophetic pronouncement, turn to Revelation 1:1. Is there any statement that would suggest a time frame for the fulfillment of the events foretold? Can one rightfully interpret Revelation as primarily an end-time prophecy? From chapters 2 and 3, what conclusion can be drawn as to the people for whom The Apocalypse was originally addressed? Does Rev. 6:9-11 shed any light on Rev. 20:4-6? Can one legitimately interpret the “thousand years” of Rev. 20:2 literally and then interpret “key,” “chain,” “dragon,” “bound,” and “the Abyss” figuratively? If those who reign with Christ are “the souls of those who had been beheaded” (a reference in 20:4 that recalls those who appear in 6:9-11), can one legitimately interpret the passage as referring to all Christians? The careful interpreter may not always know the full explanation of a passage, but he/she can certainly rule out some things that the passage does *not* mean.

MODULE 2 Matthew and Mark

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark present the story of Jesus Christ in their own unique way. While in full agreement with the other two Gospels and with each other, they address different audiences. Matthew has a Jewish orientation; Mark has a more Roman flair. The authors organize their material differently and emphasize those matters which help them tell the basic story of the mission of Jesus. When you read Matthew, you may want to imagine yourself as a Jewish believer or unbeliever. When you read Mark, consider yourself a Roman citizen.

Numerous theories have been offered as to which Gospel was first and whether some of their writers borrowed from the others. Most scholars contend that Mark was written first and that Matthew made use of Mark's work. What appears strange about this position is that Mark was not one of the twelve apostles intimately associated with Jesus, but Matthew was. On the other hand, if Peter was the inspiration behind the Gospel of Mark, as some suppose, then it becomes a matter of one apostle "borrowing" from another or perhaps using commonly agreed to language, either recalled or reduced to writing.

Accounting for the verbatim sayings and description of events has baffled scholars for a long time. In the absence of a biblical statement that explains the identical notations, guess work is the best one has to offer. Scholarly theories should be weighed against the evidence and held as hypotheses. The more significant thing here is that the several witnesses agree in their testimony about Jesus

What is more consequential is the way the Gospel authors mold common strains into coherent witnesses to Jesus. These common features attest to the reliability of the witnesses. The unique way these common parts are woven into the fabric of a Gospel testifies to the fact that the Gospels are unique. Significantly, we do not have to rely upon one obscure Gospel account for testimony to the most extraordinary event in the world's history.

In the absence of definitive information as to how the Gospels were assembled and when they were composed, you must come to grips with the authenticity of the materials. The best approach is to accept the documents as genuine and trustworthy unless there is clear reason to believe otherwise. The study of Matthew and Mark is intended to introduce you to the concerns which the texts themselves raise. However, the major task is to come to grips with the dominant person of the texts--Jesus.

We will be proceeding toward specific objectives: (1) Identify the leading features of Matthew and Mark, (2) Recognize the personalities that are important to Matthew and Mark, (3) Recognize place names that are pertinent to the content of Matthew and Mark, and (4) Interpret teachings that appear in Matthew and Mark.

The module is contrived in three units. Unit 1 is titled The Gospel according to Matthew: Overview. Unit 2 is The Gospel according to Matthew: the Text. Unit 3 carries the heading The Gospel according to Mark.

Unit 1. The Gospel according to Matthew: Overview

The Gospel according to Matthew is one of four biblical accounts of the ministry and work of Jesus Christ. The composition is labeled a "Gospel" because it contains the "Good News" that Jesus came to save people from their sins (cf. Matt. 1:21). This is the news for which the world had longed. It announces the fulfillment of a divine promise to Abraham.

Matthew connects the story of Jesus with the past and prepares the reader to declare the Good News throughout the world. The author connects the past with the present by indicating that the events

surrounding Jesus were truly the filling-to-the-full certain passages from the Hebrew Bible. The person reading his account with full knowledge of the passages Matthew cites will recognize his argument. These are not necessarily predictive prophecies in the conventional form. But Matthew's methodology leaves no doubt that Jesus belongs to God's history of redemption.

As you examine Matthew, (1) identify the leading features of the Gospel, (2) recognize the personalities that are important to the composition, (3) recognize pertinent place names, and (4) interpret teachings that appear in the composition.

The unit is laid out in three sections. These are (a) Matthew: reading the text, (b) Matthew: introductory matters, and (c) Analyzing the Gospel according to Matthew. If our interest in Matthew is to understand the message so we can react to it in a responsible manner, we must understand that a responsible response depends upon correct interpretation. The *beginning point* is a careful reading of the text.

A list of recommended book resources may be found on the Course Menu under Extended Resources, in the Electronic Collection, and in the NU online library. Others will be noted as Internet Sources in the syllabus proper. There is certainly more here than you can digest, so keep your attention of the biblical text itself. The Gospel according to Matthew is original material and should take priority to whatever other reading you may do.

a. Matthew: reading the text. Begin this module with a casual reading of the Gospel of Matthew. At the onset, it is important to gain a general "feel" for the Gospel. Pass over difficult passages lest the flow of your reading be interrupted. If possible, read the Gospel in one sitting. You may wish to mark problem passages as you go. You may also want to make brief notes. But the object of the reading is to become acquainted with the story and the way the author presents it.

Since the Gospel was intended to confront the reader with the Messiah, two results should accrue from your reading. First, you should encounter the person of Jesus. Second, you should be challenged with the prospect of becoming a disciple, if you are not one already. If you are a disciple, you will no doubt be challenged to make a deeper commitment.

Realize that some parts of the Gospels are imbedded in the culture of 1st century Palestine and in the history of Israel. For example, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the days of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem" (2:1); "When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (3:7); "We have Abraham as our father" (3:9). If you are unfamiliar with such locations and identifications, you will find the answers in your further study of the Gospel. Try to put yourself in the original setting as much as your are able with your present knowledge and listen to the text from that point of view.

Following your initial, casual reading of Matthew, go back through the book. As you re-read, make more complete notes. Repeat the process until you feel you have a good working knowledge of the content of the Gospel.

Transitions in the text often lack the sharp definition Westerners expect to find in a composition. So, remember, you are reading an ancient document. The author has marked transitions, yet in a different way. Your task is to resist the temptation of remaking the Gospel into a modern literary piece. Discover the beauty of its message.

b. Matthew: introductory matters

Authorship. The Gospel according to Matthew is attributed to one of the twelve disciples Jesus chose to accompany him during his ministry. Matthew is also know by the name Levi. He was a publican, that is, a Jew who collected taxes for the Romans. Consequently, he was despised by the Jews for helping those who occupied and controlled Palestine during the 1st century. And, he would have been despised, because tax collectors often charged excessive amounts to compensate for their services to Rome. As might be imagined, Jesus drew the disdain of the Pharisees when he had table fellowship in a tax

collector's home.

Relation to the other Gospels. Whether Matthew was the first of the Gospels is disputed; most modern scholars believe Mark wrote first and that Matthew borrowed heavily from Mark. The dependency of Matthew on Mark has yet to be proved, but the explanation of how the two came to contain verbatim material has yet to be settled in the scholarly world. Some even conjecture that Matthew borrowed heavily from an unknown source, which they label "Q." Since scholars have yet to explain satisfactorily the commonalities found in the Gospels, we should not uncritically accept speculation about a mystical "Q" source or quickly accept the conjecture that Matthew borrowed from Mark, who was not an apostle.

Ancient tradition contains the claim by Papias that Matthew composed a previous work in Hebrew (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History,* 3.39.16), yet its existence or relationship to the Gospel is unknown. So, what we have is a Gospel, whose traditional author is the apostle Matthew. That Gospel parallels closely those by Mark and Luke, even to the point of containing exact material.

Date of composition. The date of Matthew's composition is unknown. Scholars conjecture it may not have been written before 80 C.E. That date would tend to make the author an old man, but still younger than the apostle John when he wrote his Gospel, epistles, and The Apocalypse. There is neither internal nor external evidence for even an approximate date of composition. Some scholars who put a late date on Matthew tend to think he is reinterpreting the teachings of Jesus to fit the church of a later time.

Character and structure. Matthew is more "Jewish" than the other Gospels in the sense that he favors the language that would be less offensive. For example, he employs the term "kingdom of heaven" over "kingdom of God." He has a strong interest in the Messiah. This suggests he wrote specifically to Jews, but whether they were believers or not cannot be determined.

As for structure, Matthew alternates large blocks of teaching discourse with narrative. Some have gone so far as to suggest that his structure is copied from the "five books" of the Torah, but this may be an overreach.

c. Analyzing the Gospel according to Matthew. Having become familiar with the text of Matthew, let us try our hand at analyzing the structure of the book. As we begin, we are aware that chapters and verses were not part of the original text. They have been added to assist the reader in analyzing and locating passages. However, they rarely mark transitions of thought as the original author would. Consequently, they have a minor role in actually analyzing the text of a biblical book. These divisions can be helpful, but they should not be considered definitive. The same is true with headings that appear in some Bibles. The headings identify general topics for easy location by the reader, but they cannot replace the serious student's own investigation of the text.

You may summarize Matthew something like this: A presentation of Jesus as Savior, together with select teachings and activity that constitute the good news to be preached to all nations. If we can begin to comprehend the book as a whole, it will make a review of its several parts easier. Of course, if the book is unfamiliar, we can begin with the parts and ask how these come together to constitute a meaningful whole. There is always the possibility that the parts are unrelated and that there is no clear purpose. However, careful reading should dispel the idea that the work is encyclopedic or an incoherent collection of sayings and descriptions.

Keeping our summary in mind as a working hypothesis, let us proceed to see if the book reveals transition points. We could look for changes in locations, topics, or literary genre. We note, for instance, that the author does give hints as to territorial focal points. Matthew records the birth of Jesus as being in Judea. Joseph and Mary took the child to Egypt for safety reasons, then returned to Nazareth. Jesus' baptism and temptation took place in Judea, but when Jesus begins his ministry, he withdrew to Galilee (4:12). Matthew marks the beginning of his distinctive message about Jesus with the words, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17). In 19:1, he writes, "When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea." From the Gospel of John, we learn that Jesus made several trips from Galilee to Jerusalem, but Matthew

organizes his description of Jesus' ministry around two locations: Galilee and Judea (Jerusalem in particular). However, a turning point in Jesus' ministry is signaled in 16:21, where the author says, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

Matthew also tends to congregate activity. The sermon on the mount is contained in three chapters, whereas Luke reports similar teaching in a different sequence. The parables tend to be grouped, as does a series of woes. So, we are prepared to study the Gospel in an orderly manner, but not in a way that maps out every move chronologically.

A key to understanding Matthew's message is the formula, "to fulfill/was fulfilled," which he employs ten times (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 21:4; 27:9). The formula does not necessarily mark a division of thought, but it is important in setting the agenda.

Unit 2. The Gospel according to Matthew: The Text

You may be tempted to read the four Gospels as if they were intended to be collated. The idea of a "four-fold" Gospel has been around since early post-apostolic days. However, each Gospel is unique. Each is organized in a slightly different manner. Each has a unique emphasis. Therefore, it makes more sense to read them as complete compositions.

It is good to keep in mind that the Gospels do not take on the form of divine dictation. They show the personality of their authors and are directed to different audiences. What is remarkable about them is that they are in harmony. This is a mark of inspiration and authenticity.

Matthew has a story to tell. The way he tells that story becomes the key to his purposed goal. Structurally, the author breaks his Gospel into three parts, marked by a formula: 1:1-4:16, 4:17-16:20, and 16:21-28:20. The material incorporated in each section contributes to the author's purpose and is part of his plan. He presents Jesus as the Messiah, who brings salvation to mankind.

Naturally, all the Gospels are governed by a sense of chronology. The birth of Jesus precedes his teaching, and his teaching precedes crucifixion. But there is no rule that says a Gospel writer must put every event in a chronological sequence. Matthew prefers to organize Jesus' teaching by grouping parables (chap. 13) and reporting many of Jesus' teachings in one event (sermon on the mount, chaps. 5-7). This makes it harder to handle when trying to read the four Gospels as a single document, but the discerning reader will not be distracted if he concentrates on the story the individual writer is telling. The rule of thumb is to read the book as written and glean the message he intends.

In addition to his literary design, Matthew adopts an unexpected technique for showing Jesus to be the Christ. He will take a passage from the Prophets that has no apparent reference to Jesus and use it to give a "fuller" meaning (fulfillment) to it. Another rule of thumb is to allow the writer to define his own methodology and read for the full impact.

a. Preparation (Matt. 1:1-4:11). Matthew commences with the genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17). After describing the events surrounding the birth of Jesus (1:18-2:23), the author relates events that led to his ministry (3:1-4:16). We may assume that Matthew omits details included in the Gospel of Luke because they were not essential to his purpose.

Establishing Jesus as the Messiah by his lineage (1:1-17). The foreground to the ministry of Jesus begins with God's predetermined decision to provide redemption to humanity through Jesus Christ. The Hebrew Scriptures bear witness to the long period of human preparation. Hence, Matthew acknowledges the link between the story he is about to tell and the past. He establishes Jesus Christ as a descendant of David and Abraham (1:1-17). David was the king, whose lineage God designated as everlasting. It was to

Abraham that God began to reveal his plan and designated him as the one through whose family Jesus would be born (Gen. 12:1-3). Any Jew of his day would recognize that the connection set Jesus forward as the promised Messiah.

Establishing Jesus as the savior by the circumstances of his birth (1:18-2:23). The circumstances of his birth and the testimony of scripture confirm Jesus as Israel's "savior." He was born in Bethlehem of Judah, an event Matthew declares to be supported by the prophet Micah. Jesus is honored by wise men from a pagan nation. But Herod, king of the Jews, sought to kill him, for he saw the child as a threat to his kingdom. Consequently, the family fled to Egypt. Matthew sees the words of Jeremiah fulfilled in Herod's slaughter of the babies at Bethlehem. When the family returned to Palestine, they went to Nazareth, their home town. Here, Jesus remained until embarking on his ministry at age 30 (see Luke 3:23).

Establishing Jesus as the Son of God at his baptism (3:13-17). John was a forerunner to Jesus. He preached repentance in view of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew sees John's work as having been prefigured by the prophet Isaiah. In the course of his preaching, Jesus appeared and demanded to be baptized. But Jesus was not baptized for remission of sins; he was baptized to "fulfill all righteousness." In the event of his baptism, Jesus established a connection between divine righteousness and baptism. From Pentecost forward, those baptized (immersed) under the authority of Jesus Christ were made righteous by the blood of Christ (cf. Rom. 6:11).

Jesus identified with humanity, not as a sinner, but as a savior. He was the Son of God, who came with a divine mission to bring salvation. His status was confirmed by a voice from heaven.

Establishing Jesus as led by the Spirit of God (4:1-11). Before entering his ministry, Jesus was subjected to testing by Satan. He withstood the devil's temptations. He had nothing to prove to Satan, and he resisted the devil's efforts to derail him from his mission. The temptations were real (cf. Heb. 4:15), but his faith in God was stronger.

b. The Galilean Ministry (Matt. 4:12-18:35). As we have noted earlier, Matthew portrays Jesus' ministry in two geographical locations: Galilee and Judea. The Galilean ministry begins at 4:17 and extends to 18:35.

Initially, Matthew describes the calling of two sets of brothers to be his disciples (4:18-22) and introduces Jesus as a preacher, healer, and exorcist. The statement is a summary statement as it includes many activities; Jesus has by now attracted large crowds from all regions of Israel (4:23-25).

Following the general introduction of Jesus, Matthew records a sermon that took place near the Sea of Galilee (chapters 5-7). The sermon becomes a synopsis of the teachings of Jesus, who was regarded by the crowds as one having authority, not simply as a learned teacher.

In chapter 8, Matthew begins to reveal the mission of Jesus. First, it is one that may include healing, but his mission was not to be characterizes as a healer (8:1-4). He encounters a Roman army officer, whose faith is deeper than what he found among the Israelites (8:5-13). His healing and casting out demons confirmed his mission (8:14-17). Amid the performance of miracles, Jesus declared that becoming his disciple would be costly (8:18-22). He had opportunity to teach his close disciples the meaning of faith and something of the person who was in their midst (8:23-27). His power was further demonstrated through the casting out demons (8:28-34). When he healed a paralytic with the words, "your sins are forgiven," the crowd "was filled with awe" and praised God for granting such authority (9:1-8).

The call of Matthew to discipleship is included; the significance of this appointment was that Matthew was one of the hated tax collectors who cooperated with the Romans and sometime extracted for themselves more than a just tax. The circumstance drew criticism from the Pharisees, who saw the act as a breach of spiritual purity. Here, Jesus makes it clear that his mission is a spiritual one, and it involved calling sinners to repentance (9:9-13). Jesus was questioned about fasting, a sign of spirituality with the Pharisees (9:14-17). On the way to raise a ruler's daughter, he was approached by a woman with an impurity. While some may have seen the act as improper, Jesus saw it as an indication of faith (9:18-26). The intensity of

opposition by the Pharisees begins to grow. He heals the blind and the dumb (9:27-31). But when he casts out demons, the Pharisees attribute his power to Satan (9:32-34). Matthew brings the section to a close with a transition statement. First, he summarizes Jesus' teaching and healing. Then, in showing Jesus' compassion for the people who are bereft of spiritual leadership (9:35-38), he commissions his disciples to preach the coming kingdom of heaven throughout the land (chapter 10).

Matthew includes an episode relative to John the baptizer, now imprisoned for his righteous preaching. John's doubts are answered and Jesus informed the crowd as to the one to whom John testified (11:1-19). This is followed by Jesus' condemnation of Israel, who has not repented; they fare worse than the Gentiles (11:20-24). The hope of Israel is in Jesus (11:25-27), who calls Israel to the Father through himself (11:28-30). Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, the sacred day of rest (12:1-14) and he is God's servant (12:15-21). While the crowd considered his lineage from David, the Pharisees attributed his work to Beelzebub (Satan) (12:22-37). They demanded a sign, and he offered the sign of Jonah (12:38-45) and took advantage of a circumstance to declare that those who do the will of God are his brethren (12:46-50).

Matthew groups a series of parables that Jesus spoke describing the kingdom of heaven. These included the parable of the sower (13:1-23), the parable of the weeds (13:24-30, 36-43), the parable of the mustard seed (13:31-35), the parable of the hidden treasure (13:44-46), and the parable of the net (13:47-52). When he finished the parables and returned to his home town, he found little evidence of faith (13:53-58).

Matthew now includes several events. These are the beheading of John the baptizer (14:1-12), feeding the five thousand (14:13-21), and walking on the waters of Galilee (14:22-36). These events demonstrated the evil of Herod's family, the compassion of Jesus, and the lack of faith on the part of the disciples.

Confrontation with the Pharisees returns over the clash concerning religious traditions and purity (15:1-28). The author includes an interlude with the feeding of the four thousand (15:29-39) before returning to conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees, who asked Jesus for a sign from heaven to prove himself (16:1-4). The disciples, on the other hand, suffer from a lack of faith on their own (16:5-12). Albeit, when Jesus asked them who they and others thought he was, Peter confessed him to be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus then promised to build his spiritual community on that confession but warned the disciples against broadcasting it yet, for the time had not come (16:13-20). Jesus must first die (16:21-28). While Jesus refused to give the obstinate Pharisees a sign, a heavenly sign was given to the disciples in the form of a transfiguration of Moses and Elijah (17:1-13).

Scattered episodes follow with the healing of an epileptic boy (17:14-23) and a discourse on the temple tax that shows both the rightness of payment and Jesus' special relationship with God (17:24-27). He then began to teach on humility (18:1-9), the value of the lost (18:10-14), proper action toward one who sins against you (18:15-20), and mercy (18:21-35).

c. The Judean ministry (Matthew 19-28). Matthew has concluded his discussion of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and begins to describe the movement of Jesus toward Jerusalem and his crucifixion. He begins with a confrontation with the Pharisees over the question of divorce (19:1-12). Jesus uses the example of children (19:13-15), a young ruler's inquiry (19:16-30), and a parable of workers (20:1-16) to illustrate the true possessors of the kingdom of heaven. When alone with his disciples as they traveled toward Jerusalem, Jesus began to prepare his disciples for what awaited him there (20:17-19). To illustrate the failure of understanding, the mother of two of Jesus' disciples requested that her two sons be given exalted positions in his kingdom (20:20-28). Two blind men, who acknowledged Jesus to be the Son of David, asked for, and received, mercy from the compassionate Christ (20:29-34).

Once he had arrived at the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem, Jesus prepares for his "messianic entry" and awakens the entire city (21:1-11). He proceeded to the temple, where he cleared it of those merchandisers (21:12-17). The next day, he bolstered the faith of his disciples through cursing a fig tree (21:18-22) and met the questioning of the chief priests as to his authority (21:23-27). Three parables

follow that illustrate the dubious position of those who oppose him: the parable of the two sons (21:28-32), the parable of the tenants (21:33-46), and the parable of the wedding banquet (22:1-14). His words to them agitated the chief priests and Pharisees and led them to seek his arrest. The Pharisees then conspired with the Herodians (those who supported the Herod family as local rulers under the Romans) to trap him so they would have grounds for the arrest (21:15-22). Jesus met the opposition of the Sadducees (21:23-32). His response brought astonishment from the crowds and an end of efforts from his enemies to trap him (21:33-46).

Jesus then issues seven woes against the Jewish religious teachers (chap. 23). He reveals that due to their unbelief, persecution will come to those who believe in him, but that the temple, which is the center of the opposition's hypocritical practices, will be destroyed (chapter 24). For the disciples, he admonishes watchfulness and faith, using three parables to illustrate: the parable of the ten virgins (25:1-13), the parable of the talents (25:14-30), and the parable of the sheep and goats (25:31-46).

As Matthew advances the story, he notes the plot of the Jewish leaders against Jesus (26:1-5), Jesus' anointing at Bethany (26:6-13), Judas' agreement with the leaders to betrayal him (26:14-16), the last Passover meal (26:17-30), Jesus' prediction that Peter would deny him (26:31-35), his prayers in Gethsemane (26:36-46), Jesus' arrest (26:47-56), trial before the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin (26:57-68), Peter's denial (26:69-75), and Judas' hanging (27:1-10).

The scene now shifts to the Romans. Jesus is delivered to the Romans, because the Jews did not have the authority to kill him, and they wanted him dead. Jesus stood before Pilate, the Roman governor, and received the sentence of death. Pilate handed out the death sentence, not on legal grounds, but as an appeasement to the Jewish leaders. The actions of Pilate showed disrespect for Jesus and Roman law and disdain for the Jews (27:11-31). Matthew describes the crucifixion (27:32-56), the burial (27:57-66), and resurrection of Jesus (28:1-15). He ends his work with the commission Jesus gave his disciples. The commission asserted the authority of Jesus and the mission that he laid out for them (28:16-20).

Exegesis. As an exegete, you are asking the passage to reveal for you the meaning of all the detail. First, notice that the location is moving from Galilee to Judea (19:1) and Jerusalem (21:1). Why? This is a purposed move in the dramatic presentation of Jesus. His triumphal entry as "king" and his relationship to the temple become critical to his work. They also help explain his rejection. But Matthew's story does not end in crucifixion but in the resurrected Jesus' commission to his apostles. When this becomes clear, go back and exegete the individual pericopes (sections).

As you come to chapter 24, be careful with what you read in commentaries or even take from the heading in some Bibles. The chapter has been abused and taken to mean what is not apparent. The subject is the destruction of the temple. We should not suppose the disciples understood yet the nature of the kingdom Jesus had come to establish. And we are not entirely sure of what they meant by "the end of the age." Most modern interpreters rush to the conclusion that it refers to the end of the world. But an age is an era. The disciples could not imagine that the temple would again be destroyed as it was by the Babylonians. Also, "the Son of Man" imagery indeed speaks of Christ, but Old Testament language helps us to understand that "coming on the clouds" is a sign of judgment. The fact that the Son of Man comes on the clouds further identifies Jesus with God The sense of watchfulness is enjoined--an idea that applies to Jerusalem's destruction, which occurred in 70 C.E. and to each of us as we live. Keep in mind that the language of the text and the context in which it occurs points to 70 C.E. more than it points to the final consummation of the world. Jesus is not speaking to the disciples in some mystical language; he is preparing them for the end of the Jewish economy in view of the universality of the gospel and the ending of temple sacrifices. Jesus himself is about to become the only sacrifice they will need from here forward.

Unit 3. The Gospel according to Mark

The Gospel according to Mark occupies second place among the twenty-seven distinct compositions of the New Testament. It follows Matthew and is positioned among the three Synoptic Gospels. Its contents

parallel closely the patterns adopted by Matthew and Luke. John's Gospel, on the other hand, is not included among the Synoptics or "Gospels that are seen together" due to its structure and choice of material.

The inclusion of Mark in the New Testament canon of scripture brings us another witness to Jesus. It's genius is not that it is an alternative Gospel. Neither is it replete with contradictions, novel ideas, or questionable sources. But Mark's presentation does lay emphasis on the effect Jesus had on his audiences. Although not all who encountered him chose to believe in him, he provoked amazement on the part of all who heard him speak or saw his deeds. Mark emphasized that Jesus evoked fear; awe overcame those who saw Jesus for who he was. Not that the other Gospels failed to portray Jesus in a similar way, but this aspect is raised to a high level by Mark's Gospel.

Modern scholars often look to Mark as the Gospel from which the others copied and expanded. The question of who provided original source material for the Synoptics is not likely to be solved to everyone's satisfaction. Why does the puzzle need to be solved? What we have in Mark's Gospel is a faithful account of Jesus' work. Whether Mark was first does not matter. It is his message that counts.

As an interesting sideline, the author of this gospel is the same John Mark who deserted Paul and Barnabas on their first journey. A relative of Barnabas, Mark later became useful to Paul. Although not an apostle, he was a follower of Jesus and evidently knew the story well. Mark demonstrates in his own life (as did Peter) the human side of how one can know and believe in Jesus, be tempted to flee from potential persecution, and return to be a diligent witness. If Mark was once weak in faith, he declares faith boldly in his written witness.

a. Mark: reading the text. Proceed to read (or listen to audio) the Gospel of Mark in the same manner as you read Matthew. Pay special attention to the text. Notice how Mark moves quickly from one episode to another. Sense his style of writing. Become aware of how the manner of his presentation differs from that of Matthew. Note that Jesus' response often comes from a question from his opponents or a remark by his disciples.

As always, you should read a biblical book with little presupposition as to what you will find. Read to discover the simple truths which the book seeks to convey. Recurring words and phrases can reveal the author's agenda. Even his choice of words, which may differ from another Synoptic writer's account, can indicate a purposed point or unique emphasis.

As you read, ask the following questions. What seems to be the purpose of Mark's writing? What are the major points in his presentation? Are there markers along the way that signify new directions of thought?

You may find it helpful to think in terms of two general sections to the Gospel of Mark. The first encompasses the first nine chapters and concentrates on the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The second concentrates on the latter part of his ministry as he leaves his home territory of Galilee and goes to Judea in the south of Israel.

By way of observation, with the reading of Mark you begin to sense how multiple written accounts of the life, teachings, and person of Jesus circulated. Just as oral testimonies reached a diverse audience over a wide territory, written and more permanent documents told the story well. And just as you would expect, each presentation (whether in the form of a Gospel or as recorded in Acts of Apostles) bore accurate testimony to the essential message.

b. Mark: introductory matters. The Gospel according to Mark is thought to be the first of the four Gospels written, although this has yet to be proved to everyone's satisfaction. A leading reason for this assessment is the modern hypothesis that Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark's account. The evidence presented in support of this idea is a structured framework to account for passages where the exact wording is found in more than one Gospel. The suggested date of composition has tended to range from 50-75, with a generally accepted date assumed to be about 60 C.E.

Mark is certainly similar to the other Gospels, especially to Matthew and Luke. It contains descriptions of many of the same events and quotations from the characters noted in those events. But Mark is distinctive. In style, its statements are direct and to the point. It is a compact version of Matthew and Luke. This abbreviation is achieved by omitting the genealogy, the birth narrative, many of the parables and discourses found elsewhere, and a shortened account of some events.

Mark's purpose appeals to be less to reveal Jesus through genealogy or specific teaching than to reveal him through action and reaction. He touches on the same familiar themes of the other Gospels: his baptism and temptation, calling disciples, healing, prayer, casting out demons, walking on water, feeding the five thousand. He concentrates on the fact that Jesus taught and the destination to which his teaching would lead. When Jesus speaks pointedly of his approach death, Peter rebuked him. Jesus in turn would rebuke Peter as ignorant of the mind of God. This is followed by the transfiguration. Jesus continues to speak of his death, evoking astonishment and fear. These two products run throughout the Gospel as if to show that Jesus is someone from God. If we take the short ending of Mark, the Gospel ends on that note as well.

Mark's vocabulary appears less accommodating to a Jewish audience than Matthew's. It is often said to be addressed to Romans. Whether the author's intended audience was Roman believers or unbelievers is unknown, but it appears that it is less an apologetic or evangelistic composition than a work designed primarily for believers.

The traditional author is Mark, a companion of Peter and sometime associate of Paul. Traditionally, it has been assumed that this Jewish believer wrote under the oversight of the apostle Peter, who accompanied Jesus throughout his ministry. No indication is given in the text as to the location for writing. Perhaps it was composed over a period of time and from several locations. Authorship and place of writing are not essential to an understanding of the text.

c. The Gospel according to Mark: the text

The beginning of Jesus' ministry (Mark 1-9). Mark sets forth "the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). That gospel starts with Isaiah's declaration to prepare the way, an announcement that comes through John the baptizer (1:2-8). At his baptism, the divine voice declares Jesus to be God's Son and the angelic ministration demonstrates his faithfulness through temptations by Satan in the desert (1:9-13).

Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee after John's arrest. The focus of that message was, "the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (1:14-15). Jesus called disciples (1:16-20), taught in the synagogue at Capernaum and amazed his audience as one who had authority, and demonstrated his authority by casting out an evil spirit. As Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons, he became known throughout Galilee, but the response from the crowd made it difficult to pursue his intended course of teaching (1:16-45).

In an incident of healing, Jesus declared a man's sins forgiven, which the Jewish teachers interpreted as blasphemy, since only God can forgive sin. As Jesus claimed this divine prerogative, he identified himself, the Son of Man, with God (2:1-12).

When Jesus called a tax collector to be his disciple and ate in his house, the Pharisees complained. But Jesus responded that he his mission was to save sinners (2:13-17). In a question about his lack of fasting, Jesus identified himself as a bridegroom in their midst--the one who had come for Israel, his bride (2:18-22). When he plucked grain on the Sabbath and the Pharisees complained, he announced he was the lord of the Sabbath (2:23-28). His healing on the Sabbath roused the Pharisees to solicit the help of the Herodians to kill him (3:1-6). Yet, as Jesus taught, healed, and cast out demons, the crowds were attracted to him, and the demons were confessing he was the Son of God (3:7-12).

Following Mark's identification of the twelve disciples (3:13-19), he returns to the encounter with the teachers of the law, who attributed Jesus' power to Satan (3:20-30). Jesus took note of his physical family

and declared that his spiritual family embraced those who do God's will (3:31-35). Mark is aware that Jesus often taught through the use of parables and includes the parable of the sower (4:1-20), the parable of the growing seed (4:26-29), and the parable of the mustard seed (4:30-33). The inclusion was interspersed with illustrations from household lighting and cooking (4:21-25).

Mark records that even those who believe in him often react to him out of fear, such as when the disciples were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee (4:35-41). The demons reacted in similar fashion, for they knew Jesus' identify (5:1-20). A synagogue ruler whose daughter had died and a woman healed of a physical disorder showed the same reaction of trembling and fear (5:21-43). The contrasts between those who believed and those who lacked faith are constantly displayed in the text. The people of Nazareth, his home city, were among the unbelievers (6:1-6), yet Jesus persisted in his teaching and in sending out his disciples (6:7-13). The beheading of John the baptizer by Herod indicates both the evil of the ruling family and the distress experienced by that evil (6:14-29). The author continues his story by relating the feeding of the five thousand (6:30-44), another incident of fear on the Sea of Galilee (6:45-52), and Jesus' attendance to the crowds who gathered around him (6:53-56).

Pharisees continue to engage Jesus about violations of their traditions, which they elevated to the level of the Torah (7:1-23). Their manner contrasted with that of a Gentile woman who sought Jesus to cast out a demon from her daughter (7:24-30) and with the people of the Decapolis (7:31-37). As Jesus continued to teach the crowds, the Pharisees continued to test him (8:1-21). He also continued to heal (8:22-26). Near Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples who the people thought he was, only to solicit from his disciples who *they* thought he was. Peter said, "You are the Christ" (8:27-30). Then, Jesus began to teach about his death (8:31-9:1). The transfiguration established for the disciples his authority, but they were not prepared for his death as part of his mission (9:2-13). An episode that involved the disciples with a boy with an evil spirit further accented the distinction between Jesus and his disciples (9:14-32) and set up a discussion on the nature of the kingdom (9:33-50).

Jesus leaves Galilee for Judea (Mark 10-16). Like Matthew, Mark divides his composition geographically, by separating Jesus' work in Galilee and Judea. Once Jesus passes out of Galilee, he addresses a Pharisee test case regarding divorce (10:1-12) and teaches on the nature of the kingdom of God with illustrations from little children and a rich man (10:13-31). On their way to Jerusalem, Jesus prepares his disciples for his death (10:32-34) and divulges the suffering aspect of discipleship (10:35-45). Mark briefly returns to a scene in Jericho and the healing of a blind man (10:46-52).

As Jesus enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, many people proclaimed him to be the promised descendant of David (11:1-11). The next day, he cleared the temple of those who took advantage of the worshipers (11:12-19). He counseled his disciples to have faith (11:20-26). The chief priests and leaders of the Jews questioned Jesus about his authority but were confounded by his reply (11:27-33). Jesus offered a parable of the talents that condemned them (12:1-12). He also refuted the Pharisees and Herodians who attempted to ensnare him (12:13-17). He silenced the Sadducees with his tort on the resurrection (12:18-29), and a teacher of the law with his question about the most important commandment (12:30-34). Jesus raised his own question of the lawyers regarding the son of David before warning the crowd to beware of them (12:35-40). His observation about the widow who contributed her living was embarrassing to the rich who tithed (12:41-44).

Jesus observed that the temple structure would be destroyed. Rather than be concerned about this prediction, Jesus warned his disciples to be on their guard lest their faith be stripped away through persecution by those who occupied the temple and the synagogues (chapter 13). As the Passover drew nigh, the chief priests and teachers of the law searched for a way to arrest Jesus and kill him. Meanwhile, Jesus was anointed with oil, an act he interpreted as being in preparation for his death (14:1-11). At the Passover meal, Jesus instituted a communion meal that would recall his death (14:12-26). Jesus informed his disciples that they would all fall away during the next few hours (11:27-31). At Gethsemane, Jesus prayed fervently (11:32-42) before being arrested (11:43-52) and tried before the Sanhedrin (11:53-65). Peter did indeed deny Jesus, just as Jesus had foretold (11:66-72).

The chief priests, elders, and whole Sanhedrin delivered Jesus to Pilate with the request to crucify him

(15:1-15). The Roman soldiers mocked him (15:16-20) and crucified him (15:21-32). When Jesus died (15:33-41), he was buried in the tomb of a member of the Sanhedrin (15:42-47). On the day following the Sabbath, Jesus' tomb was empty, but Jesus appeared to three women believers and instructed them to tell the disciples. In the best attested manuscripts, the work ends with a notation that the women were trembling, bewildered, and afraid (16:1-8).

MODULE 3 Acts and the Modern Church

The first two modules focused on exegesis. This module takes a decidedly alternative route. It will assume exegesis and move toward application. The process will givey ou experience in extending the hermeneutical process.

The book commonly called Acts of the Apostles has held a prominent place in the historical church. However, the role of Acts in the life of the church remains dubious. It is not that the church does not appreciate the book; the reasons seem to lie elsewhere. The book has been useful for understanding the historical circumstances surrounding preaching the gospel to Jews and Gentiles. It gives insight into the nature of the gospel preached, the persecution that preaching evokes, the disposition of believers, and regular activities of believers. But questions remain. Among these are, How is the content to be appropriated to a modern world? Does the New Testament provide a legislated model of a Sunday worship service? Does Acts mandate selling personal property and distributing the proceeds among the poor saints? Are charismatic gifts of healing and prophecy still in use? The task for the modern reader is to determine the legitimate application of the message of Acts after it is understood within its original context?

The matrix for applying the substance of Acts in a later time period is set by a church's traditional view of Scripture and interpretation. Wide differences exist between Roman Catholic handling of the text of Acts and liberal Protestant handling. Although the distinctions may not be as well marked, significant differences also exist among Evangelicals. Even the diverse ways Acts is viewed by elements within a local congregation of Christians can impede progress toward achieving a consensus on how to use the book.

This module takes a fresh look at some of the major themes in Acts in hope of sharpening the focus for understanding the meaning of the book for the contemporary church. Although an array of important themes will be acknowledged as worthy of further pursuit, this endeavor will concentrate on the preaching event and the results which followed in order to identify behavior which the modern church should emulate.

The module is broken into three units. These are Preliminaries (Unit 1), Implications for the Modern Church (Unit 2), and Recommendations to Searchers and Contemporary Leaders (Unit 3).

Unit 1. Preliminaries

The effort at hand proceeds from the presupposition that Acts is inspired and holds meaning for the contemporary church. The appropriation of the message of Acts begins with an understanding of the book's content for its first readers. It is assumed that the text itself is the most reliable indicator as to what principles or patterns, if any, are mandated for the present church. Appropriation of the book's contents to the modern age may be presumed whenever specific instruction or principles so indicate.

There may be cases where other biblical texts press application for what appears to be incidental notice in Acts. Indeed, before full evaluation of a doctrine or practice can be made, other biblical materials should be analyzed. But even comparative studies must be governed by the intent of the individual authors. These fuller studies, however, lie beyond the scope of this undertaking, which is limited to the more apparent deductions that can be drawn from Acts.

Care will be taken not to devalue those concepts which receive little notice in the text of Acts, knowing that the author selects and presents only material that carries his story to its just conclusion. Omitted material may be extremely important but not useful for the writer's purpose. Casual references to practices should not be down-graded on the basis of infrequent mention.

The contention of James Robinson that doctrine (*e.g.*, Christology) and church practice (*e.g.*, sharing possessions) changed during the years covered by Acts will not be explored,[1] even though the outcome of the discussion could affect the conclusion of the discussion at the most fundamental level. If his contention is taken to mean that doctrine remains ever developing and principles drawn from church practice are always circumstantial, Acts would play a diminishing role in the modern church. At best, the book would provide a point of departure, not a point of instruction. The assumption made here is that the "understanding" of doctrine may have been enhanced by later biblical discussions, but the concepts are not a matter of human reflection dictated by a need to adjust doctrine to fit the church's fledgling status. Robinson correctly understands that church practices often change from place to place and from time to time. For example, while the principle of sharing possessions remained in place, the specific action needed was circumstantial. Communal sharing (Acts 2:44) was not a required behavior (Acts 5:4), but responding to the needs of the poor was deemed an appropriate action (Acts 11:29-30). Herein lies a basic principle of appropriation: circumstances will often determine if an act should be replicated or suggest what action is required. Wisdom must determine if a specific act is required or if a principle is being set forth that evokes a relevant act.

In the final analysis, human judgment is inescapable in biblical interpretation, for unique circumstances beg for rulings which the Scriptures do not address directly. Church leaders tend to decide a course of action in keeping with tradition, personal preference, presuppositions, and safety. A challenge arising from a free society is that everything from politics to religion is judged based on personal interests. Individual Christians within such societies typically ask, Does this interpretation fit my understanding, my standard of right and wrong, my view of what God accepts or rejects?

It may be that many practices in the church today are the result of tradition or have been established through assumptions about what the author of Acts intended, but never stated. For the sake of divine truth, a question that must remain open is, How much authority have moderns to determine what the author of Acts intended as enduring practices? In all probability, matters of tradition are far less important than attitude and behavior in the face of persecution.

a. The purpose of Acts. Much of what one sees in Acts for appropriation depends on how one understands the author's purpose. Several purposes have been proposed. One is that it was written to the Roman government as an apology for Christianity. When Christian legitimacy was challenged by opponents (unbelieving Jews in particular), the author supposedly undertook a lengthy presentation of its historical course. A second suggestion is that Luke-Acts was created for the purpose of converting unbelievers.[2] A third idea that has been advanced is that the author was writing to correct some heresy about Jesus and the church. Another has proposed that Luke advanced a theological treatise to explain the church's mission during the delay in the return of Jesus.[3] A more likely purpose is that Luke-Acts was produced primarily for believers[4] to confirm their faith in Jesus by showing how God's purposes were fulfilled in Jesus and in the expansion of the church to include Gentiles.

Confirmation of believers' faith points beyond technical affirmation of the historical reality to confirming the salvation declared by the apostles and approved by God through signs. Rejection of his salvation through unbelief is disobedience to God. Luke-Acts is therefore "a call to firmness in the faith."[5] At the same time, the work is an apology for the Way against paganism, Judaism, and charges of subversion.[6]

Because Luke-Acts tells how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Rome,[7] it is history. Since it defends Christianity, it is an apology. Inasmuch as it gives insight into the way Christians thought about God, Acts is a theological statement.[8]

Acts has even been classed as a "Gospel," for "it communicates the same Good News of God's salvation." Perhaps most telling of its nature is that "Acts is a 'story,' a connected narrative of events involving movement, conflict, change."[9] The author connects the story of God's past acts with Israel to the present reality of his redemptive acts in Jesus.

As the second of a two-volume work, the common focus of Acts is Jesus Christ, who invites men and women everywhere to experience the salvation, which he alone brings from God. Events identified with the apostles and early disciples were but a continuation of Jesus' presence.

When Luke lays out his intention for his Gospel, he acknowledges that he has investigated matters pertaining to Jesus. These matters are in fulfillment of Scripture and are written in an orderly account to assure Theophilus of their certainty (Luke 1:1-4). That he had accomplished only part of his task in the Gospel seems clear from his closing statement. The fulfillment of passages pertaining to Jesus in the Law, Prophets, and Psalms relates not only to the Christ's suffering and resurrection but also to the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. The apostles of Jesus were witnesses, sent forth under the direction of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:44-49). The opening of Acts shows that the author's intent is to continue his story by recounting the witnessing activity of his disciples (Acts 1:1-8).

It could be argued that in Acts, the author demonstrates how the word of salvation was proclaimed and confirmed without conceding that evangelism was a primary aim. The presentation served an essential role in helping believers understand the basis of their faith, which in turn provided the agenda for their own proclamation. Scriptural prophecies were fulfilled[10] in the coming of Jesus, in the development of the church, and in the coming of salvation to the Gentiles. Because the events described were considered a continuation of the acts of God among Israel, the church itself, now made up of Gentiles as well as Jews, exists in continuity with Judaism. The salvation revealed to the Jews during Jesus' ministry began to be carried by Jews and Gentiles everywhere by the faithful witnesses. The author, in turn, deals with the tension that existed within the early church over the Gentile mission, a mission that insisted that the Gentiles' faith stood independent of keeping the Law of Moses.[11]

Among the several important subjects of Acts are the Holy Spirit, the church and kingdom of God, the mission of the disciples, the poor, women, the disadvantaged (the eunuch, Samaritans, Gentiles), and various ministries. The Holy Spirit was inseparable from the preaching of the apostles and from the life of the believers. Although not identical in every respect, the church and kingdom of God are presented as the manifestation of God's predetermined activity.

The mission theme is developed in several ways. First, the apostles are "witnesses" to Jesus. Then, the activity of evangelists like Stephen and Philip illustrates intentional preaching. Wherever believers were scattered by persecution, they proclaimed the Christ. The constant touring and preaching by Paul and his associates suggest that preaching among all world citizens indicates the enduring nature of evangelism. "Ministry" in Acts is not limited to a given group, but those endued with the Holy Spirit (*e.g.*, apostles and prophets) and those specially appointed for unique work (*e.g.*, elders) receive special attention. These subjects occupy a pronounced place in the book, but for the sake of this course, preaching/teaching, worship, and fellowship are the points of interest.

The content of preaching/teaching is important due to the foundation it lays for the events which followed, especially worship and fellowship. Whenever there was preaching, something significant happened. The preaching activity and the events it produced will now be surveyed in an attempt to set forth the thrust of the message may be set forth.

b. A survey of preaching/teaching in Acts. Proclamation is a central motif in Acts. Preaching or related activity may be introduced by a series of words, including *euaggelizō*, *kērussō*, *parrhēsiazomai*,

and *didaskō*. Some sermons and speeches are summarized (see Table 1 below). There are other references where only an allusion to preaching is made (see Table 2 below). Additionally, speeches were delivered to disciples for the purpose of either clarifying the message or encouraging the believers (see Table 3 below).

Table 1.--Sermons and Speeches in Acts, Summarized

Reference in Acts	**Proclaimer**	**Occasion**	**Place**
2:14-40	Peter	Pentecost	Jerusalem
3:12-4:2	Peter and John	The temple	Jerusalem
4:8-12, 17-18	Peter	Sanhedrin	Jerusalem
5:29-32	Peter	Sanhedrin	Jerusalem
7:2-56	Stephen	Jewish dispute	Jerusalem
8:30-35	Philip	To an Ethiopian	Gaza Road
10:28-43, 47	Peter	To Cornelius	Caesarea
13:16-49	Paul and Barnabas	Synagogue	Pisidian Antioch
14:15-17	Paul and Barnabas	Citizens	Lystra
16:13-32	Paul	Jewish worship	Philippi
17:1-3	Paul	Synagogue	Thessalonica
17:22-31	Paul	Men of Athens	Athens
22:1-21	Paul	Sanhedrin	Jerusalem
23:6	Paul	Sanhedrin	Jerusalem
24:10-21	Paul	Before Felix	Caesarea
26:20-29	Paul	Before Agrippa	Caesarea
28:23-28	Paul	Jewish leaders	Rome

Table 2.--Sermons and Speeches in Acts, Allusions

References in Acts	**Parties**	**Place**
1:22	Matthias	Jerusalem

5:21, 25, 28, 40, 42	Apostles	Jerusalem
8:4-5, 12	Philip	Samaria
8:25	Peter and John	Samaria
8:40	Philip	Palestinian Coast
9:20, 22, 27	Saul	Damascus
9:28-29	Saul	Jerusalem
11:20	Men of Cyprus and Cyrene	Antioch
13:5	Barnabas and Saul	Salamis, Cyprus
14:1, 3	Paul and Barnabas	Iconium
14:6, 12, 21	Paul and Barnabas	Lystra and Derbe
16:10	Paul to Macedonia	
17:10-11, 13	Paul	Berea
17:17-18	Paul	Athens
18:5-11	Paul	Corinth
19:8-10	Paul	Ephesus
28:30-31	Paul	Rome

Table 3.--Speeches to Disciples

References in Acts	**Persons**	**Place**
2:42	Apostles	Jerusalem
11:23	Barnabas	Antioch
15:6-31	Apostles, Elders, James, Church	Jerusalem
15:32	Judas and Silas	Antioch
15:35	Paul and Barnabas	Antioch
15:36, 39-41; 16:5	Barnabas and Mark; Paul and Silas	Syria and Cilicia
18:23	Paul	Galatia and Phrygia
18:24-26	Priscilla and Aquilla with Apollos	Ephesus

18:27-28	Apollos	Achaia
19:1-7	Paul and twelve men	Ephesus
20:1	Paul	Ephesus
20:2	Paul	Greece
20:7-12	Paul	Troas
20:17-35	Paul and the Ephesian elders	Miletus

Considerable difficulty accompanies an effort to catalog all the preaching/teaching references in Acts. In some settings, the audience has never heard the gospel. In others, the audience had first-hand knowledge of Jesus' own teaching ministry. Some recipients were already believers who eagerly listened to spiritual encouragement, as occurred when Paul visited the brethren at Ptolemais (21:7), Caesarea (21:8-16), and Jerusalem (21:17-20a). Nevertheless, when taken together, the references provide direction for discovering the central message of preaching/teaching in Acts.

Proclamation began at Pentecost. The phenomenon of Pentecost was explained by Peter as the fulfillment of prophecy (2:16-21). The Spirit of the Lord was now being poured out. The purpose is caught by the phrase, "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." The Pentecost sermon reveals that Jesus, who was accredited by God through miracles, was resurrected in keeping with Scripture and is now at the right hand of God. The requirement for receiving forgiveness for having participated in Jesus' death is repentance and baptism in his name. The Holy Spirit is promised to those who so act.

The same theme developed in the Pentecost sermon recurs in sermons delivered later to Jewish audiences, with some extensions. The purpose of God, which was revealed first in Abraham and the fathers, is carried to its conclusion in Jesus (3:13; 7:2-53; 13:32, 36; 26:6). The fulfillment theme is also extended (4:11; 7:42-43, 48-50; 8:32-33; 13:33-35, 47; 15:16-18; 26:22-23). God's work among his people in past time pointed to the Messiah's suffering, death, and resurrection as the means to salvation. Likewise, he signaled the expansion of his reign to include the Gentiles. The sermon to an all-Gentile audience in Athens does not make use of Jewish history but pagan poetry; it does make clear the exclusiveness and sovereignty of the God of the Jews. Jesus and the resurrection were key elements in that sermon, so the message was substantially the same.

The focus of preaching in Acts is the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, with the attending blessing being salvation "summed up as the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit." The author tells how the message of salvation was spread, even in the face of considerable opposition. In persecution, believers remained committed and the message of salvation proceeded along its victorious path.[12]

The work of evangelization, encouragement, and service was carried on by apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, elders, and specially-appointed ministers to deprived widows, in addition to assistants to Paul and Barnabas. The events noted are credited to the will and purpose of God. Even church life fell under the intervention of God during critical times.[13]

What is specifically important for this discussion is the result of the preaching in Acts. Summations in the early part of Acts (2:42-47; 4:32-37) provide a portrait of small clusters of baptized believers "meeting together for teaching, fellowship, prayer and the breaking of bread."[14] Or, to put it another way, "What matters for Luke is that Christians come together and share in the common life of the church--in fellowship, in prayer, and in mission."[15]

c. The result of proclamation. The preaching of Jesus produced two distinct classes, based on response to the message: (1) those who chose to disbelieve and (2) those who believed. To "believe" implies an acceptance of the teaching pertaining to God's purposes, namely that the Scriptures are fulfilled in Jesus, whom God resurrected and made Messiah and Lord**.**

Those who disbelieved. Disbelievers were of two types: (1) those who simply turned away, albeit some sneered (17:32), and (2) those who promoted strong opposition. Opposition was sometimes led by Jews in authority. In Jerusalem members of the Sanhedrin were in the forefront, both in the early days (Acts 4) and latter days (Acts 23). Sometimes the opposition was mounted by prominent Jews in communities scattered across the Mediterranean world. Preaching at Thessalonica produced strong opposition (17:5), while more mixed reaction greeted Paul at Athens (17:32, 34) and Rome (28:24-25). Especially active were Hellenistic Jews who opposed Paul (9:29; 21:27).

Opposition came from unbelieving, jealous Jews (14:2, 19; 17:5, 13; 18:12) and from a sorcerer and merchants whose income was threatened by the gospel's effect (13:6-8; 16:19-21; 19:24-28). The earliest opposition came from the Sadducees and was occasioned by the preaching in Jesus the resurrection of the dead (4:2). Charges brought against the proclaimers generally pertained to unfaithfulness to the law or the temple (6:11, 13-14; 16:21; 18:13; 21:28; 23:29; 24:5-6; 25:19), but also included opposition to Rome when convenient (17:7).

Those who believed. The actions that follow each of the proclamation accounts reveals the consequence of preaching for believers. The author's summary after the Pentecost sermon provides the most complete statement in Acts and marks the point of departure. "The believers . . . devoted themselves to the apostles" teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (2:42-47a NIV). This general summary is a fair composite of the various responses noted throughout Acts. We should not assume, however, that every believer supported apostolic preaching, as the case of believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees (11:2; 15:1-5). The responses may be grouped loosely under three headings: preaching, fellowship, and worship.

Preaching. Although not specifically stated in the above summary, it is clear from the text that follows that the disciples themselves engaged in evangelistic activity. With Stephen's death, a great persecution afflicted the believers, causing them to scatter. These, in turn, continued to proclaim the Christ wherever they went (8:1, 4). Conversion created an urgency to preach, as was the case with Paul (9:27-29) and men of Cyprus and Cyrene and others (11:19-20).

New disciples required nourishment, which was supplied by men like Barnabas (11:22-23) and others at Antioch (13:1). Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time encouraging new believers at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch against hardships associated with entering the kingdom of God (14:21-22). Believers gave up their idolatry (19:23-27) and discarded their sorcery (19:19). Paul healed the ailing and cast out demons (19:11), as did the apostles (2:43; 3:6-7; 5:12) and others (6:8; 8:6). When the disciples were true to their faith, God showed his pleasure through the Holy Spirit (8:17; 10:44-45; 11:15, 24; 13:2) and by granting growth in numbers (2:47; 19:20).

Fellowship. As a consequence of their repentance, believers chose a new direction, a new lordship. There were deviants, however, as is indicated by the cases of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10), some Jewish Christians (6:1), and Simon (8:9-24). Nevertheless, a selfless life was expected. The way this selfless life was manifested was in freely emptying oneself in the interest of others (2:44-45; 4:32, 36-37; 11:29-30; cf. 20:34-35).

Fellowship among the believers included sharing possessions with those who lacked. It appears to have had close connection with "the breaking of bread" together (2:42). Breaking of bread is the expression

used for the common meal, but it is also employed for the Lord's supper (20:7, 11), serving to heighten the significance of the supper. Fellowship was associated with eating in the home with other believers. It is embraced in the hospitality extended by believers to one another, as practiced by Cornelius (10:48) and the Philippian jailer (16:34). Constant teaching, encouragement, and worship were so integral a part of the life of the believing community that it is hard to separate them.

Worship. The "worship" interests of Luke revolve around four kinds of activity: exuberance, petition, praise, and collateral exercises. All of these were practiced by the believers in Jerusalem. Worship, fasting, and prayer were practiced at Antioch (13:2-3). Bread was broken at Troas (20:7, 11);[16] prayer and singing were done at Philippi (16:25).

Realization of the forgiveness of sins produced a sense of joy that could not be contained. The gospel brought great joy to a city in Samaria (8:8). The Ethiopian eunuch went home rejoicing after his baptism (8:39). Following his conversion, the Philippian jailer's family was filled with joy (16:34). While jealousy kept Jews in unbelief and enmity, salvation led Gentiles to gladness, joy, and the gift of the Holy Spirit (13:45-52).

Prayer is an often-mentioned practice, being indicated by the Greek words *deomai*,[17] *proseuchomai*,[18] and *proseuchē*.[19] Fasting occurs much less frequently, but is associated with prayer (13:2-3; 14:23; cf. 9:9, 11). Prayer is offered at times of worship, but it may be occasioned by special events like persecution, the opening of mission points (13:2-3), and the appointment of elders (14:23). It appears that fasting heightened the prayer event.

Praise to God was occasioned by reports on the progress of the gospel. When Jewish believers at Jerusalem heard from Peter how the Gentile Cornelius had been saved, they praised God (11:18). The report of the mission of Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles produced similar responses in the Antioch (14:27) and Jerusalem churches (21:17-20). Only passing reference is given to singing, but when it is mentioned, it is during a prison stay at Philippi by Paul and Silas and is associated with prayer (16:25).

A strong correlation existed between preaching, joy, and worship. Summary statements attest that prayer and praise occurred regularly (2:42, 47; cf. 3:1); specific instances show when and how they happened. Times of opposition sparked a keen interest in prayer (4:23-31; 7:59; 16:25), as persecution only intensified the desire to rejoice and preach the good news (5:41-42). On an occasion of harassment by the Jewish authorities, the apostles rejoiced "because they had been counted worthy" to suffer for Jesus and continued to announce the good news that Jesus is the Christ (5:41-42).

Conclusion. Preaching salvation in Jesus Christ led believers to repent and experience the forgiveness of sins through baptism (*i.e.,* total immersion of the believer in water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The teaching done by the apostles became the basis for the Christian life, which included preaching, fellowship, and worship. The believers became adamant about preaching to others. Their worship consisted of praise, prayer, fasting, singing, and breaking bread (the Lord's supper). Socially, the believers shared possessions with the needy, encouraged one another to keep the faith, and maintained close fellowship through eating together. Their spirits were characterized as joyful and awe-inspired. They engaged in their common tasks through frequent meetings.

Unit 2. Implications for the Modern Church

The difficulty of finding a narrow answer to the question of the purpose of Acts may appear to cloud the issue of the role of Acts in the modern church. One can legitimately ask, If we do not know the intention of its author, how can we be certain about its application? To allay the uncertainty, may we suggest that we state the obvious and proceed from there.

If Luke states in the opening of his first composition (the Gospel of Luke) that he is writing so the reader can know the certainty of the events described (cf. Luke 1:4), then it is a safe conclusion that the second

volume (Acts) shares the same function. The manner in which the two books are linked demonstrates a shared purpose. The contents of Acts further suggest that the book contains teaching that is destined to be both universal and lasting.

In the end, however, the real problem is not whether the content of Acts is reliable, but what may be extrapolated for application in future generations. We may begin with the foundational core of the gospel itself, which is an announcement of the good news of how God provides redemption to Jews and Gentiles through Jesus Christ. But how does the essence of that gospel abode in the modern age, when incarnation, miracles, and the idea of resurrection are not provable by the scientific method? In answering the question, we should remember that the philosophers at Athens and the Jewish Sadducees rejected the idea of resurrection as well. Resurrection became, and continues to be, an essential element in the gospel presentation. One cannot simply deny one leg of the foundation and have a full gospel. But affirming the resurrection does not address the question of miracles. Does the presence of miracles in Acts suggest that the miraculous is a continuing phenomenon in the modern church? Miracles showed divine involvement then. Does it continue to do so today? Simply put, how do we determine what is essential teaching and what is continuous action?

To move on another front, if the ministry of the church in the 1st century is described as consisting of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and elders, are we to conclude that the modern church must have all of these functionaries? If the answer is yes, then we are faced with a dilemma, for we would of necessity have to recognize the continuation of the apostolate and inspired prophets. If the answer is no, how does one determine which to eliminate? In the absence of a fool-proof hermeneutical scheme, we have no choice but to dig in and wrestle with the text in a responsible manner.

The unit will approach the subject of application with a look at three aspects: (a) preaching/teaching, (b) fellowship, and (c) worship. We will leave you with the task of making other applications, as this is a course in principles.

a. Preaching/teaching

The agenda. Given the content of preaching/teaching in Acts, a primary implication for preaching includes presenting salvation in Jesus as fulfillment of the purposes of God. Being true to the spirit of preaching found in Acts means the proclaimer will either acquaint his audience with the past acts of God among Israel or he will build on that awareness. With an uninformed audience, one may need to begin at a different place, as did Paul with the philosophers in Athens, but he will ultimately deal in a significant way with material found in the Hebrew-Aramaic Bible. What is true of preaching to adult unbelievers will also be true for teaching children and adult believers. There is no substitute for dealing with Old Testament material.

Connection with God. Apostles and believers proclaimed Jesus as the Christ enthusiastically and as a matter of urgency (6:11-7:53; 8:4-5; 11:19). Amid persecution, Peter and John recognized the need to ask God for strength in the endeavor. The text of Acts makes it clear that God provided continued guidance. Paul was told by the Lord to leave Jerusalem (22:17-18), was given assurance at Corinth that the Lord was with him and no harm would befall him (18:9-11), and was comforted during a storm at sea (27:23-24). On other occasions, however, the Spirit forbade (16:6) or compelled Paul to go, even warning him that he faced persecution (20:22-24). Whether through direct intervention (as with the apostles) or not (as in post-apostolic times), the work of preaching is a divine work and should be undertaken with that in view.

Place and occasion. The place of proclamation began in the temple courts (2:46; 3:1; 4:1; 5:42) but soon spread to homes (5:42; 10:22), a chariot (8:28-30), synagogues, a river bank (16:13), legal courts (4:5ff.; 6:15), the market place (17:17), a school hall (19:19), a scholar's colloquy (17:19), and the scene of arrest (21:40). A proper place for preaching is wherever there is an audience. The occasion for preaching/teaching may be as frequent as daily (5:42; 17:17) and as infrequent as weekly (20:6-7). It is not the frequency that is important but its intensity and effectiveness. A local church that is attempting to be true to the spirit of preaching/teaching in Acts will provide both the atmosphere and occasions for

proclamation to unbelievers and encouragement to believers. This implies two items: (1) a serious evangelistic effort toward non-Christians in the local community and in the world at large and (2) a well-designed and well-executed educational effort for children and adult believers.

Motivation and atmosphere. The behavior of the early believers was conditioned perhaps as much out of a sense of appreciation for forgiveness as much as specific instruction. The significant difference between believers and unbelievers is the motivation for their acts. While behavior may be more "caught" than "taught," the setting of an atmosphere where Christ-like behavior can be demonstrated is incumbent upon the leaders of the modern church.

Training in the art. The significance of preaching in Acts suggests that the contemporary church actively encourage and train in the art of proclamation. Beginning with the young, the leadership will do well to develop an environment that will encourage believers to preach/teach. Then some means (formal and informal) should be initiated that will continually develop the members in the art of preaching/teaching**.**

b. Fellowship. The practice of "fellowship" was conspicuous in the early church. When seen in its most intimate form, fellowship embraced daily comradeship. Each believer's need was the need of his fellow-believer. Hospitality, breaking of bread together, and contributing financially to a deficiency described the disciples' fellowship. The kingdom of God was not a mere communistic society; rather, it was relationship rooted in the common experience of forgiveness of sins. In this context, several implications may be drawn.

Teaching and atmosphere. From the crisis described in Acts 6, it is apparent that there were in the early church community people who were slow to learn the meaning of fellowship. Old prejudices hindered the practice of contributing to human need. The implication is that, as a matter of course, believers should be drawn into true fellowship through teaching and the provision of an atmosphere where this can readily occur.

Routine need assessment. The crisis reported in Acts 6 also suggests that, given the nature of the Christian experience, needs of various members should be discovered and served before a crisis develops.

Bonding believers. In principle, the sharing of possessions by the early believers suggests that modern Christians should make a caring response whenever and in whatever circumstances a personal necessity may arise. Because meeting personal needs was associated with believers, the only implication that may be drawn safely from Acts is that the object of benevolent activity was the believers. This may not rule out benevolent action toward unbelievers; it only means that Acts deals with believers. In its true meaning here, fellowship is a bonding between believers.

The place of fellowship. Since much of the contact between believers was in homes, the abode of Christians becomes a natural place for intimate fellowship to occur. But inasmuch as fellowship is endemic to Christianity, it need not be limited to the home. Rather, it should extend both to the home and other places of convenience.

c. Worship. Jews were worshiping people before they became believers in Jesus Christ. It is only natural to think they would continue to adore God through praise, hymn, and prayer. The source material for their worship was the Hebrew-Aramaic Scriptures. The Psalms would have been of special significance. Additionally, the apostles and other teachers probably had much to relate about the meaning and expression of worship. Several implications may be drawn for present-day worship.

The worship environment. Since the atmosphere surrounding the early believers was one of awe and joy, it follows that this same environment is one which would be appropriate and conducive to worship for contemporary Christians. Inasmuch as a sense of forgiveness motivated the 1st century believers, their worship was surely propelled by an appreciation of salvation. Acts gives the impression that worship was spirited.

Praise. Praise grew out of a sense of reliance upon, and reverence for, God. The content of praise was rooted in the acts of God and the subsequent relationship which he made possible. To be informed of God's acts, one must be familiar with the Scriptures--both old and new. The offering of praise may be somewhat spontaneous, but to some degree one's praise must be informed by the particulars that appear in connection with praise noted in the Scriptures.

Prayer. Prayer is such a dominant theme in Acts that its place in the life of the Christian community cannot be missed. As with praise and hymns, prayers evolve out of a sense of relationship with God. The crafting of appropriate prayers demands that serious attention be given to their purpose and direction as indicated in the Scriptures.

The Lord's supper. The Lord's supper, though not mentioned often, occupied a meaningful position within the early church. From Acts alone, one is unable to fathom the significance of the supper, but its place among believers is established**.**

Fasting. Fasting, especially when combined with prayer, served an important role for the first disciples. Its legitimacy is established as a facilitator of actions deemed essential to the full life of the church.

Reporting on the gospel's progress. When believers assembled, they heard of the progress of the gospel in other places, particularly its progress among the Gentiles. Reporting on God's work beyond the confines of the local community serves to bond believers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Unit 3. Recommendations to Seekers and Contemporary Leaders

The course has been about application of the contents of Acts as determined by careful exegesis. For exegesis is to be of any existential value, it must lead to personal application. Reflecting the ideals of Acts in the structure of the modern church creates a shell in which the dynamism of individual spiritual life manifests itself. Both exegesis and application are but a means to a desired outcome.

We recognize that students in this course come from a variety of backgrounds. Some are Christians, but not all. In an effort to make the course attractive and useful to all students, we will endeavor to enter this last section of the course with three situations in mind. Situation *one* assumes the student is a Christian, who has some leadership opportunities with a local church. Situation *two* assumes the student is a Christian, but has little opportunity to influence the life of the local church. He/she may be an active participant without much voice for change. Situation *three* assumes the student is a seeker. That is, he/she is not a Christian or he/she is a Christian in search for a community of believers with whom to identify. No matter which category describes your own circumstance, please do not feel threatened by the discussion. The comments are intended to be helpful in clarifying potential action.

You may be interested in seeing the implications for all three situations described above, but we recommend that you pick one and pursue it to the end of the unit. The three sections follow the pattern established earlier, with respect to (a) preaching and teaching, (b) fellowship, and (c) worship.

Be as critical as you wish with the suggestions. Our intention is to ask that you think critically and with that to assume personal responsibility for your conclusions. You may find it timely to make notes as to what you find and what you decide to do with your insights. Hopefully, the result will boost your efforts to make greater use of the New Testament.

a. With respect to preaching and teaching

Situation one: A leaders in a local church. If you are in a leadership position in a local church, here are some ways you may use this course in a positive way.

1. Review the congregation's evangelistic outreach. Analyze the means now in place for disseminating the gospel and make appropriate adjustments that result in teaching more people about Jesus Christ. You may need to examine structures, attitudes, motivations, Scripture competencies, presentation skills, occasions, and other areas of church life.

2. Experiment. Keep working at outreach until significant response is realized. Search out all possible occasions for presenting the gospel of Christ. Encourage members to create and take advantage of natural occasions for teaching their own children, other believers, and unbelievers. Help those members whose spouses are unbelievers to cope with their special circumstances. Develop an atmosphere within the congregation that makes evangelism natural. Because the world is the field in which the seed of the gospel is to be planted, develop a far reaching missionary program to which local Christians can be attracted. Search out members who are willing to go on short and long-term ventures.

2. Review the preaching done from the church pulpit. Make certain that the preaching includes an adequate emphasis on the purpose of God, the meaning of forgiveness, and the Christian experience. Do not judge preaching on the basis of people's comfort zone but on the text of Scripture itself. Insist on being connected with the living God and avoid a legalistic subterfuge.

3. Evaluate the church's educational efforts. Determine the extent to which the programs for both children and adults inform the students about Old Testament material. The program will be only as strong as its curriculum, its teaching staff, and the administrative procedures employed to expedite it. Make sure an atmosphere is created that is conducive to raising questions and challenging stereotyped ideas. Provide proactive leadership. Create and maintain effective training and in-depth study for new and continuing teachers. Find ways to bridge between the instructional period at the church building and the home. Provide instruction in how to study the Scriptures in private and small group settings. Use only that contemporary literature which facilitates the educational process; do not allow secondary literature to determine the curriculum. Provide the support (materials, work-space, supervision, assistance) needed to maintain an effective educational program. Ascertain the amount of time needed for classes on the basis of doing a job well, not on a traditional time allotment. Arrange students in classes where they can receive the maximum instruction and encouragement. Consider new and novel ways to package the educational experience. Remember, what worked for a former generation may not be as effective today as some other arrangement may be. And what works well in one culture may be ineffective in another. You are obliged to find the best means to the end in your own circumstance!

Activity

Make a list of areas where you believe the local church could learn something about preaching and mission work from the Book of Acts. Develop a plan for making others aware of those areas needing attention. Create a plan for implementation and begin your work.

Situation two: A participant. Should you be a participating member in a local church with little opportunity to bring about change, you still have the opportunity to evaluate the content of preaching/teaching and the manner in which it is done. There may be occasions when you can make positive comments that will contribute to improvements. As you study the Scriptures and draw your own conclusions, you need not agree with the conclusions others have drawn. Just make sure your own study is sound and your conclusions are sustainable. You also have a right to question applications that are improperly drawn. Apply the critical thinking that this course has aimed at developing. Remember always to be kind and considerate of others in your responses. Do not show off your knowledge or assume a judgmental attitude. There is always the possibility you could be wrong and the other person is right. You are trying to understand others' positions, analyze how they reach conclusions, ground your own faith, and teach as you have opportunity.

Activity

Enumerate on paper the strengths and weakness you find in the preaching/teaching at the local church. Work through these carefully in your own mind. As you have opportunity, share your thoughts

with others and ask for their feed-back.

Situation three: A seeker. If you are seeking, you have a right to expect what you hear in a religious context to be supported by scripture. From the study you are concluding, you have seen how early Christians had differences about important issues. This did not mean that all positions were correct. It meant that human interpretations and perceptions got in the way of clear thinking. Many current perceptions have grown up over the two millennia since then. Diverse positions are believed and stated with a sense of certainty. They may be the result of one person's opinion stated a few hundred years ago. In fact, the issues that divide modern Christians are traditional in nature and fairly recent at that. You will not find a perfect local congregation of Christians. You will need to judge by the Scriptures where those weak points exist and decide if these are essential to faith.

Activity

Given what you know of the Book of Acts and what you observe in any local church, analyze the extent to which that church displays the strengths of the ideal church in matters of teaching. If you are not in a position to do that, create your own portrait of what a church should be, given the content of Acts. In instances where believers are persecuted for their faith and practice, they may be forced to form a secluded community of believers.

b. With respect to fellowship

Situation one: A leader in a local church

1. Identify and supply the personal needs of believers. Needs differ according to circumstances. Single-parent family needs may be ongoing; grief counseling could be short-term; financial, disaster, or other acute needs may be one-time occurrences.

2. Review the fellowship practices of the congregation. An often-heard remark by non-members and new members is that they feel like "outsiders." Work on ways to integrate new people fully. They must be "absorbed" into the membership. Do not confuse perceived friendliness with acceptance.

Activity

Analyze the situation at the local church. Do you find some people feel ostracized or discriminated against? If so, develop a plan for integrating them into the fellowship.

Situation two: A participant

As you became part of a congregation, you had a reasonable expectation of being embraced and incorporated into the body. This may have been your experience. However, it is often not the experience, for old friendship groups are difficult to break into. Some of these are family groups; others are held together by common class structure.

On the other hand, the new person sometimes feels like an outsider because he/she perceives wrongly that others are trying to exclude him/her. Surprisingly, in a church fellowship, there is less class distinction than in the world. A poor person, for example, may feel uncomfortable sitting at table with the rich, while the rich man may be delighted to have the poor man at his table. The uneducated may feel out of place in the presence of the educated who speak of unfamiliar matters. But that is natural. No one is educated in every topic; people talk of what they know. The "uneducated" man in one area is far more educated in his/her own realm than the most "educated" person in the room. It is only a matter of perception. Barriers are more easily broken when all parties realize that together they make up the kingdom of God.

Activity

Analyze your own feelings. Do you feel uncomfortable around other people within the church fellowship? If so, make a renewed effort to become involved. Volunteer for jobs. Attend meetings. Go out of your way to be kind. Pick out someone with a need and fill that need. If you know of others who feel left out, take the initiative to bring them into your fellowship ring. Be extra thoughtful of them.

Situation three: A seeker

The seeker hardly knows what to expect. After all, he/she is an "outsider" at this point. Generally, one will be anxious, wanting to avoid being sucked into a cult or embarrassing situation. This can be an advantage, for it will allow the group you are exploring to demonstrate who they really are. If they are interested in you as a person, there are ways you can detect that. You have a right to be treated with honesty; they have a responsibility to welcome you without thought of repayment. From the Book of Acts, you have learned the meaning of Christian fellowship, and you know that it is a genuine product of conversion to Christ. Do not be fooled by a counterfeit offer.

Activity

From the Book of Acts, note on a piece of paper the features that will verify that a church is genuine.

c. With respect to worship

Situation one: A leader in a local church

1. Worship experience. Create a worship experience that leads, potentially, every person present in the assembly to know the presence of God. Lack of enthusiasm, routine observance of the Lord's supper, irrelevant preaching, lack of concern for child care, sterile announcements, impotent prayers, non-creative song sessions, muttered Scripture readings, and lack of purpose can hinder the worshiper's quest.

2. Prayer and praise. Find ways to enhance the prayer and praise aspects of a service by making the prayers more focused and more in keeping with biblical patterns.

3. Fasting. When appropriate, encourage times of fasting.

4. Training. Provide training sessions for those who lead worship in scripture reading, prayer, singing, and praise**.**

Activity

Observe the exuberance of worship in the Book of Acts. How could persecution make worship vibrant? Now, analyze the worship at the local congregation. How do the two compare? What might be done at the local church to improve worship? Is the issue essence, manner, or faith? Bring other leaders into the discussion and map out a strategy for future worship activity.

Situation two: A participant

A participant is a captive in local church worship. The songs and readings are selected by someone else. The appointments to lead prayers and preach the sermon are already in places. But the participant still has control over personal thoughts and should make the best of these. Distractions can be avoided when the mind is focused on prayer, praise, meditation, and communion.

Activity

With the Book of Acts in the background of your thoughts, list your own expectations from a worship service. Share these with others as you have opportunity, in hopes that your suggestions may be taken in a spirit of positive contribution.

Situation three: A seeker

As an observer, you can learn much about a congregation from its corporate worship. You certainly cannot judge the hearts of the worshipers, but you can evaluate what you experience. The attractiveness of a church may be the experience of the worship hour. Does the worship draw one nearer to God? Does it revolve around God, as it did in Acts? Does it serve to unite the congregation? Is the Lord's supper a regular part of the worship?

Activity

Make a list of the key elements in worship as suggested by the Book of Acts. If your circumstance requires meeting with a few other believers in a secluded location, what elements do you deem essential?

Endnotes

1. James M. Robinson, "Acts," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 470.

2. J. C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting*, 2d ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1970), 176.

3. Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, trans. James Limburt, *et al*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xiv.

4. Martin Dibelius may be right in asserting that the Acts was written for both Christian and non-Christian communities, since the likely readers would have been cultured and educated. See Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Heinrich Greeven (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1956), 103.

5. W. C. van Unnik, "The 'Book of Acts' the Confirmation of the Gospel," *Novum Testamentum*, 6 (October 1960): I, 26-59.

6. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 22-24.

7. Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the New Testament 1900-1950* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1951), 111.

8. In his treatment of the theology of Acts, Bruce discusses (1) the doctrine of God, (2) the doctrine of Christ, (3) the doctrine of the Spirit, (4) the church and its ordinances, (5) the Gentile mission, (6) biblical theology, (7) soteriology, and (8) eschatology. See Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 60-66. While Haenchen points out that the author is not a "systematic theologian," he acknowledges that Luke does present a theology. See Ernest Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 91-92. Both Haenchen and Hans Conzelmann elaborate upon the theological concepts in Acts. God is the dominant person, originating the plan of salvation, raising Jesus from the dead, anointing Jesus, sending the Holy Spirit, and causing miracles through Jesus and the believers. See Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoggrey Buswell (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 173-77. Marshall elaborates on Luke as a theologian, focusing on soteriology. See I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 214.

9. Jerome Crowe, *The Acts*, vol. 8 *New Testament Message* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1979), xi.

10. The concept of scripture fulfillment is prominent in Acts. Over twenty-five separate citations are made to O.T. texts that pertain to preaching. Another nine are referenced with regard to church life. See C. K. Barrett, "Luke/Acts," *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 231-44.

11. I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 20, 22-23, 29.

12. Ibid. 25-27, 29.

13. Ibid., 24, 32.

14. Ibid., 32.

15. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 214.

16. Some consider Acts 2:42 to be referring to eating the Lord's supper in private homes. See Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 94.

17. Acts 4:31; 8:22, 24, 34; 10:2.

18. Acts 1:24; 6:6; 8:15; 9:11, 40; 10:9, 30; 11:5; 12:12; 13:3; 14:23; 16:25; 20:30; 21:5; 22:17; 28:8.

19. Acts 1:14; 2:42; 3:1; 6:4; 10:4, 31; 12:5; 16:13, 16.

MODULE 4 The Book of Revelation

Revelation is not the easiest book of the Bible to understand. But since it is in the biblical canon, it deserves serious attention. Getting the right perspective is of prime importance. If the intention of the author is missed, the best effort to understand his composition is rendered valueless.

The book has perplexed many readers. Casual readers are so baffled at what they find that they tend to lay the book aside without putting forth the effort to understand it. Others have developed indefensible opinions as to its message. Approaches have differed so widely that interpretation moves beyond disagreement over a particular term or passage to battle over purpose. Views are so incompatible that even the would-be serious student is often bewildered. But, is this really necessary? Is the book that confusing or difficult to understand?

Much of what one gleans from Revelation depends upon how the book is approached. If, for example, one takes the book to have primary application to its original audience, then it follows that the book contains material that would be especially pertinent to that audience. On the other hand, if one understands the book to be a survey of two thousand-plus years of history, one is obligated to wait until history is complete before making a conclusive interpretation. Meanwhile, one who takes this approach speculates about the interpretation. When the speculation proves to be wrong, one's effort prove a waste of time.

Over the years, would-be interpreters have conceived a variety of ways to understand The Apocalypse. The modern student's initial response tends to be one of confusion, because he is unacquainted with both

the Old Testament and the nature of apocalyptic writing. Those who hear sermons on Revelation usually hear messages that assume a giant battle at the end of time that leads into Christ's appearance and the setting up of a millennial reign in Jerusalem.

We admit that the book does present difficulties for the modern reader. First, the nature of the writing is unfamiliar to the modern person whose reading is limited to the newspaper, e-mails, novels, textbooks, technical manuals, and poetry. This type of reading does little to prepare one for understanding the Book of Revelation. Second, the modern reader is part of the problem. The contemporary Christian is likely to read the Bible for personal inspiration rather than serious inquiry into its contents. One wants to find something there that will help one through the day. The symbolism of Revelation just seems too abstract to have current meaning. One is more likely to lay the book aside without proper encounter because he/she has already judged it to be both incomprehensible and irrelevant. This is hardly a solid platform to launch a study of any literary piece, let alone a portion of the Bible.

The task at hand is to examine the Book of Revelation in view of its literary genre, historical circumstances, and declared purpose in an attempt to discover the book's ultimate meaning. The course proceeds under the assumptions that (1) there is much certainty about Revelation that we can know and (2) the message of the book is critical for Christian faith. Speculative theology will be avoided in so far as possible. Even if every detail of the book's content is not comprehended, the study can be profitable.

Before embarking on your journey, you may wish to know the answer to three basic questions. The first is, Will the benefit I derive from studying Revelation be worthy of my time? The second asks, What should I expect to find? And, thirdly, How can I be certain that I have understood the message properly? Ironically, the ultimate answer to these questions must await the conclusion of the study. But perhaps a word will be sufficient to convince you that it will be a worthwhile venture.

Why study the Book of Revelation? Obviously, you have a wide choice of reading materials. Not only are there other religious and secular works, there are many books of the Bible that beg for attention. So why does this selection stand out? Briefly stated, Revelation opens one to the nature of the spiritual battle faced by all people. This reality is hardly mentioned in the Western world. And it is confusing to people who have been exposed to Traditional Religion. Awareness of the spiritual battle is vital for one who seeks spirituality. Beyond that, Revelation reveals the consequences for both those who are faithful to God and those who are inspired by Satan to oppose God and his people. For the Christian, the book supplies encouragement and assurance—both of which are essential in the struggle with spiritual forces.

What should I expect? The core of the Book of Revelation is a message relayed primarily in "apocalyptic" form. Hence, the book involves drama and uses a lot of symbolism to cast its central ideas. As we shall see momentarily, apocalyptic is a genre of writing that had been current in the Jewish world since the closing days of the kingdom of Judah and throughout Intertestamental times. Even Jesus made limited use of apocalyptic. Expect a dynamic portrayal of the realities of life as seen from above and below.

Can I understand the book? As for the third question, we propose laying out guidelines for a reasonable study of Revelation. Then, by your own self-study, you will have reason to believe you have discovered the intended message of the composition.

The method chosen for this study may be described as one of discovery. The aim is to allow you, the student, to discover the meaning of the text for yourself. Obviously, some introductory material and commentary are unavoidable, if this is to be a guided tour of the Book of Revelation. But the aim of the course developer is to assist in understanding without controlling interpretation. Hence, the direction is in self-discovery with minimal human intervention in the interpretative process.

The module is divided into three units. These are (1) Interpreting Revelation, (2) Revelation 1-3, and (3) Revelation 4-22.

Unit 1. Interpreting Revelation

The author of the Book of Revelation or The Apocalypse used the Greek word *apokalupsis* in the salutation to introduce the composition. *Apokalupsis* is usually translated "revelation" or "disclosure." Hence, the book pertains to a revealing or disclosing of something not apparent to the readers at the time the literary piece was penned. When used elsewhere in the New Testament, the word is simply translated "revelation" (as in Luke 2:32; Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:17), without reference to any special form of writing. To call the book "The Apocalypse" is to transliterate the opening Greek word into English (*i.e.,* make the Greek word look and sound like an English word). To call it "Revelation" is to translate the first word from Greek into English. It is the *nature* of the composition and its *similarity* with other compositions that lead scholars to prefer the term "The Apocalypse" to "Revelation." In this course, we will use the terms alternately.

Due to its nature, the Book of Revelation has lent its name to a formal literary genre of writing called "apocalyptic." *Apokalupsis* has been appropriated to reference a whole body of material that partakes of the elements found in the Book of Revelation. Writings similar in nature have a rather lengthy history, dating from the exilic and post-exilic Prophets. Apocalyptic writing flourished during the latter Old Testament period, during the Intertestamental period, and for a century after the New Testament era. So, "apocalyptic" literature was not born with the Book of Revelation. Revelation simply consists of the kind of writing that was well known in the Jewish world. But Revelation inspired a new category of thought with respect to ancient writing. Hence, a clear distinction exists between the use of *apokalupsis* in Rev. 1:1 and its meaning in the literary world.

Modern scholars use the term "apocalyptic" to identify a literary genre that contains visions interpreted for the seer by a heavenly messenger. The genre is the extension (or replacement) of prophecy by a supra historical presentation starting from contemporary events (LaCocque, *Daniel in His Times,* p. 4). Again, the word may be taken from the opening of Revelation, but the Book of Revelation does not, within itself, define apocalyptic. Neither does the dictionary definition of apocalyptic define Revelation.

Actually, Revelation takes the form of an epistle in its opening chapters, where its remarks are addressed to a specific audience. Individual messages are directed to seven churches in the Roman Province of Asia. However, the language of the text demonstrates early on that this is not an ordinary letter and that its principles are not confined to a specific time or series of events.

The Apocalypse reaches back to the Old Testament for part of its imagery. It connects Old Testament promises with Jesus. It elaborates on the portrait of Jesus found in the Gospels. It affirms the teachings of the Epistles with respect the work and position of Christ. In the end, Revelation acclaims the certainty of God's sovereignty, his promises, and his purposes. The book makes a convincing case for the worthiness of Jesus. Only Jesus is found worthy to take a scroll from God's hand and open it to reveal future events. With symbolism familiar from Old Testament texts, the book's first readers would understand these symbols as well as the use of its form of writing. Through its signs and symbols, Revelation conveys the magnitude, seriousness, and certainty of the drama that lay ahead for the Christians addressed.

The theme of The Apocalypse is victory made possible by the work and position of Christ. Jesus is identified as both the lamb slain for sins and a victorious ruler. The One who brought redemption as the Messiah is the One whom God placed at his own right hand. Christ's position is essential to the outcome of the drama, which features two personalities in conflict—Satan and the reigning Christ. Satan's efforts to control are doomed to failure because God will provide ultimate victory over Satan's power through Jesus Christ. God's judgments show the defeat of Satan and his efforts to defeat righteousness.

The message of The Apocalypse is consistent with that of the rest of the Bible. Its position at the close of the canon signals its role. Revelation presents the consummation of all of God's purposes and becomes the crowning jewel to all that precedes it. Its message is not limited to its immediate audience, but should inspire every Christian in every age.

Perhaps no other type of literature in the Bible is subjected to such diverse interpretation as Revelation. Perhaps the most difficult point to grasp will be the meaning of “fulfillment.” Is it always “literal” or can it sometimes signify a principle? How does one read apocalyptic and get its spiritual message without feeling obliged to read it as history written in advance?

A key to interpreting any book of the Bible is its *intent*. If one can discover why a composition was written, much of the guesswork can be removed. In the case of the Book of Revelation, something of purpose can be gleaned from a few passages. First, the message is directed to servants of God and is intended to be a blessing for those who give attention to it (Rev. 1:1-2). Clearly, the primary audience is Christians who lived in Asia Minor during the closing days of the 1st century. Original recipients were members of seven Asian churches, who received very specific words of encouragement and rebuke (Revelation 2-3). It follows, logically, that the remainder of the work is addressed to the same people. Today's Christians read the book to gain encouragement and warning, but Revelation must be interpreted with an awareness of those Asians who lived in the days of the apostle John. Whatever be the immediate application of some of the symbols, the body of the work addresses the relationship between God and Satan. In the end, God wins and Jesus Christ plays an important part in the contest.

Before proceeding, we must entertain two corollary questions. To what extent does Revelation fit the literary genre of apocalyptic? To what extent should interpretation follow the apocalyptic regimen? We shall begin addressing these questions with a look at the nature of apocalyptic literature according to its classical characterization. We shall proceed to the conclusion that properly interpreting Revelation depends upon acquaintance with the scope, purpose, and method of apocalyptic. The procedure is marked by three sections: (a) Apocalyptic and the Book of Revelation, (b) Approaching Revelation, and (c) Historical backgrounds.

a. Apocalyptic and the Book of Revelation

The nature of apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic, as a literary genre, presents a view of a prototypical heavenly order in which the author depicts how earthly realities are about to succumb to God's sovereign rule. Regardless of their perceived strength, humans will be unable to challenge the divine successfully, for neither humans nor Satan can prevail. A primary tenet is that God will act in keeping with his purposes to disenfranchise the forces of evil in the interest of his own lasting rule. Apocalyptic structure thus includes a revelation by God, given through a mediator, to a seer regarding future events (Barnabas Lindars, "Re-enter the Apocalyptic Son of Man," *New Testament Studies,* 22:1, 52-72; Paul D. Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic,* pp. 27-75).

Apocalyptic addresses those whose social and political structures are about to collapse. In view of these events, apocalyptic usually points to a crisis with the intention of (1) offering comfort, hope, consolation, and exhortation to God's faithful people and (2) announcing a threat of judgment to those who oppose God's sovereign reign. Eschatological pericopes are formed into a pattern of crisis, judgment, and salvation. Apocalyptic opens one to a cosmic scope that transcends history and points to judgment and resurrection.

The novelty of apocalyptic arises from its appropriateness for dealing with matters that cannot be expressed in common language. Apocalyptic represents the conflict between powers and forces that are invisible to humans. Nevertheless, these forces define the spiritual battle into which every Christian is engaged (see Eph. 6:10-18). Apocalyptic has a way of portraying the battle in an effective manner. It shows how the cosmic order is interrelated with events that transpire on earth. Hence, this special type of writing filled a unique function.

The apocalyptic vision often concerns the succession of historical events where both the human and supernatural meet. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the physical reflects the supernatural realm. Where the future comes into play, there may be messianic events, ultimate victory for the righteous, resurrection, judgment, and the consummation of the world order (André LaCocque, *Daniel in His Times,* pp. 10, 12).

The *goal* of apocalypse is faith through divine revelation. God is saying something to humans. And much of what he speaks relates to the future. Through its symbolism, God guarantees that he controls the destiny of the world and all spiritual powers. But it is the character of divine revelation that gives the apocalypse its unique sense of God's communication. Actually, the apocalypse is not radical in content; it tends to repeat and underscore in a dramatic way what should be common to the faith of God's saints. It is the unique matrix for conveying divine revelation that makes it significant.

Interpreting apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature differs from straight prediction, story, parable, gospel, epistle, and other forms which constitute the Bible. Consequently, it cannot be read as a short story or physical description of some phenomenon. Here is where some interpretations fail. They fail to take into account the nature of the literature. Unless the interpreter understands the type of literature being interpreted, there will be no controls to interpretation. One must pay close attention to the identifications that the text itself makes and be reserved in making interpretations that are unwarranted. Care must be taken not to reduce symbols to physical images. And although apocalyptic tends to divide time and events into units, one is cautioned against lining these up in some ironclad scheme of future history writing.

Is the Book of Revelation an "apocalypse"? The opening word in the book says it is an apocalypse. The question, then, is not, Is the book an apocalypse? Rather, the leading question is this: Is Revelation to be treated as a work that belongs to the modern category of literary genre defined as "apocalyptic"? In other words, does Revelation fit the definition moderns have given the word?

First, we need to recognize that the definition of an apocalypse is manufactured. No ancient sat down and said, "I believe I will produce an apocalypse that conforms in every detail to the classic, dictionary definition." The description of apocalyptic given above is a modern effort to discover common elements in apocalyptic writing from the period. It is an honest effort to combine the essentials that make a work qualify as apocalyptic writing. Are all apocalypses alike? Certainly not. Are they distinctive enough to warrant a separate category from other literary forms? We think so. But a commonly held definition is only as good as it measures the reality of the piece being measured. The *definition* should not be the measuring rod to interpret the Book of Revelation. Yet, the interpretation of Revelation should not be attempted without some sense of the category of literary expression to which the book belongs.

In summary, each apocalyptic portion of scripture is unique. And so is the Book of Revelation. The Apocalypse stands alone in the New Testament. It is neither "Gospel" nor "Epistle." Yet, it draws elements from both. The Apocalypse fits neither the category of history nor prophecy. And yet, it has a relationship to both. The Apocalypse draws from many forms of writing and blends them into a unique style, which we call "apocalyptic."

b. Approaching Revelation

Contemporary methods of interpreting the Book of Revelation. During modern times, five basic theories have been advanced for interpreting Revelation. What sets one method apart from others is the main idea it sets forth as a guideline for interpreting the book.

The Preterist method. *The method is so name because it suggests that the matters referred to in Revelation took place in past time. The words found in the introduction—"to show his servants what must soon take place"—are taken seriously and point to time that immediately follows its composition. In the strict sense of the word, the book has been fulfilled totally. Partial subscribers to the view divide themselves along several lines. Some believe most, but not all, events have come to pass. Some believe the events foretold in Revelation were historical; others believe they were fanciful. For our purposes, the main point to remember about the preterist method is that it concentrates on fulfillment in the past.*

The Continuous-Historical method. With the assumption that Revelation contains a running account of history—past and present—some have opted for the "continuous-historical" approach. The interpreter seeks historical events and personalities to fit the various elements in the book and is often revising those

identifications, being uncertain about the identification of events. A weakness of the method is that it cannot find historical benchmarks that would make the work intelligible or useful.

The Philosophy of History method. This approach looks not for actual historical markers but for a general sense of historical fulfillment. Attention is given to spiritual forces behind events on earth without an attempt to identify specific events with those forces. Hence, in scope, the method pertains to all ages. The symbols used by the author may have significance throughout the course of history. They are not limited to a single event. Likewise, the story of Revelation is not continuous. Events rising out of the opening of the seven seals and the seven trumpets are not sequential. The connection is logical, but not connected through temporal events. The book is interpreted as a manifestation of the eternal principles set forth by God to govern the affairs of men. No doubt, Revelation does deal with principles. But the question is this: Should the method used in interpreting The Apocalypse be governed by a search for principles, or should the method seek understanding within the environment of those addressed?

The Historical-Background method. The idea behind this method is that Revelation is an imaginary illusion, aimed to accommodate the various emotions of man. It becomes a spiritualize experience for the reader as he relives John's experience on Patmos. The model assumes the author wrote to encourage his readers. Necessary to interpretation is a thorough understanding of the environment—political, social, and religious—of the day. But the book itself is to be interpreted experimentally.

The Futurist method. The basic idea of the futurist approach is that most of the contents of Revelation pertain to the distant future, particularly focused on the second coming of Christ and the setting up of a millennial kingdom on earth. For those holding this view, most of the contents await fulfillment near the close of the age. The view feeds human curiosity to know the future and to read the signs of the times. Particulars of the fulfillment are said to pertain to a seven-year period of tribulation. Interpreters following the method tend to be literalists, who look for a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, embodied prophets, and an antichrist. While not all futurists are millenarians, the majority are. They tend to conflate material from Daniel with that of the Book of Revelation. Hence, even the Old Testament is not interpreted in view of Israel and God's purposes as fulfilled in the Christ and the church, but in view of the establishment of a millennial reign of Christ on earth. Further, a significant number of futurists are dispensationalists, who follow the ideas of John N. Darby, who lived in the first half of the 19th century.

Darby held that the unbelieving Jews hindered what John the Baptist and Jesus set out to do with the kingdom of God. Because the majority of the Jews rejected Jesus, God postponed the kingdom until the end of the world. The church was established as a temporary measure. Hence, Old Testament prophecies regarding the kingdom do not apply to the church but to the kingdom at the end times. Near the end, a "rapture" will occur in which the believers will be caught up to meet Christ in the air. For the next seven years, the antichrist will reign. The Jews will make an agreement with the antichrist that will enable all of them to return to Palestine, rebuild the temple, and offer animal sacrifices once again. Within three and one-half years, the antichrist will demand worship by the Jews and those who have become Christians since the "rapture." A great tribulation will break out, but finally Christ will arrive to slay the antichrist at Armageddon. Following his victory Christ will return with the faithful to establish his physical kingdom that will last for 1,000 years. The faithful will be given cities over which to rule based on the degree of their faithfulness. The dispensational futurists are represented in many Protestant denominations, and they are fond of the Scofield Bible (first published in 1909).

Futurists who do not hold to dispensational views espoused by Darby and Scofield may look for a great tribulation in which all believers will pass, a rebuilt Babylon, a personal antichrist, and a longer time than seven years for the fulfillment of the prophecies of Revelation. In both instances, however, the bulk of the Revelation is believed to apply only to those who are exposed to the great tribulation (Summers, *Worthy Is the Lamb,* pp. 28-31).

A safe route to follow in interpreting Revelation is to begin with the opening words: "to show his servants what must soon take place." The immediate recipients of The Apocalypse would have been naturally the seven churches of Asia, who are addressed specifically. Is it not reasonable that the message would have immediate and personal meaning to these saints above others? If so, the apocalyptic sections

would contain references to forces and events that lie in closer proximity to the original audience than to those living at the end of the world. This does not preclude the idea that the final consummation of all things with the ultimate sentence of Satan do not lie in the distant future, for the entire scope of God's work is here envisioned. But it does reduce the probability of continuous historical and futuristic views. It does not do away with the idea that there are principles and recurring themes in the book; it does, however, root primary interpretation in the historical world.

Seeking meaning through an analysis of the text in view of its nature and suggested intent. Since Revelation contains symbolic language, the symbols are suggestive of something other than the literal meaning. A symbol puts into visible form that which is invisible. Therefore, a proper method must assume the symbols are always figurative or, at least rarely, literal.

As for the time of fulfillment, if we are to be honest with the book, we must seek primary fulfillment in the past. The book was written to people who lived in the late 1st century. We are a later audience of people peering into their world. However, the principles drawn from the work persist into our day and beyond. So, we look first for understanding within the ancient world, and then we seek application in our own world.

Steeped in Old Testament imagery, Revelation should be interpreted considering the Old Testament terminology and symbolism. However, Old Testament symbolism will not always have the same implication and may not refer to identical events as those depicted in Revelation.

Since apocalyptic seeks to convey a larger story than its symbols, the book should be interpreted much like a parable. The elements portrayed in a parable serve to carry the story to its conclusion. It is not the elements *per se* that are important but the point the parable seeks to make. Similarly, the visions seen by John carry the reader to the end and are not meant to have specific meaning for each detail.

Exegesis begins with identifying the author's intent. In the absence of a precise statement of intent, the interpreter should pick up on hints within the text. For example, when John declares his message to be that "which God gave . . . to show his servants what must soon take place" (Rev. 1:1), he is suggesting that something important to the original readers was being revealed. As the book unfolds, one gets the picture that the people addressed were Christians who faced many uncertain circumstances that could threaten their faith. The specific audience is identified as "the seven churches in the province of Asia" (Rev. 1:4; cf. 1:11). The question as to what God will do to those who have taken the lives of those who have died for the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 6:9-11) is ultimately answered (Rev. 17:6; 20:4). As for the believer, "Let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy" (Rev. 22:11), for the victory over evil has been won and waits only God's good time to demonstrate.

The opening chapters of The Apocalypse provide the background for what follows in chapter 4. Here is where the intended audience is specified--those Christians who constitute seven churches in the western region of present-day Turkey. The symmetry of the section can be seen in the way the Lamb is initially introduced and the partial characteristics are employed in the letters to each of the seven churches.

Following a salutation, the emphasis of the chapter is on the Lamb. The Lamb, Jesus Christ, holds the key to the plight of the believers. Although his ultimate position is not detailed until chapter 5, there is no doubt of his prominent place in the book's message.

Whereas in the epistles, the christological discussion regarding Jesus is theological in tone, here in Revelation it is more practical. As ruler of the church, Jesus comes to the believers and shows his pleasure and displeasure in what they are doing. His presentation is unmistakable. He holds the authority to act on behalf of the saints, but he also holds them accountable for their conduct.

The recipients of the seven letters share much in common. Their connection with the Lamb is noted in the introductions. They are all related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. What emerges as different is their circumstance. Some face persecution. Others have begun to rely upon themselves more than upon God. Still others find themselves being ravaged by false teachers.

The letters to the seven churches of Asia raise many practical questions. With respect to Sardis, one gets the picture that most of the congregations needed reformation. Questions that rise from this situation are numerous. Who is responsible for leading the reformation? What should be the attitude of the more "spiritual" toward those who are less spiritual? How should one continue with a church that is dominantly unspiritual? Then in Laodicea, the critical question may have to do with continuance in a church that is indifferent. A minority cannot always bring about revival or set the path for reformation.

Revelation employs many images. For the most part, these are drawn from the Old Testament. As they are employed in apocalyptic, they may take on more of a “spiritual” or symbolic meaning than they do in their original setting.

Symbolic identifications made in the book itself become a key to interpretation of apocalyptic. For example, the dragon of Rev. 12:9 is identified with Satan. The golden lamp stands of Rev. 1:20 are seven churches. Some of these identifications are suggestive. For example, the harlot of Rev. 17:18 is the great city, which is, undoubtedly, Rome. The precise meaning of identification such as the seven stars of Rev. 1:20 is debated, even though the stars are identified as the angels (messengers) of the churches.

The various visions of Revelation should be seen as part of a whole message. While seals, trumpets, and bowls of wrath are presented in somewhat sequential form, they do not necessarily find interpretation in a lineal timeline. They are sequential in that they portray successive messages of warning and judgment upon evil, but no historical time periods are suggested. The subject appears to be the evil work of Satan and God’s ultimate judgment on him and his instruments as they are represented in the civilization of the Roman Empire.

Activity. For some experience in interpreting a different type of prophetic pronouncement, turn to Rev. 1:1. Is there any statement that would suggest a time frame for the fulfillment of the events foretold? Can one rightfully interpret Revelation as primarily an end-time prophecy? From chapters 2 and 3, what conclusion can be drawn as to the people for whom The Apocalypse was originally intended? Does Rev. 6:9-11 shed any light on Rev. 20:4-6? Can one legitimately interpret the “thousand years” of Rev. 20:2 literally and then interpret “key,” “chain,” “dragon,” “bound,” and “the Abyss” figuratively? If those who reign with Christ are “the souls of those who had been beheaded” (a reference in 20:4 that recalls those who appear in 6:9-11), can one legitimately interpret the passage as referring to all Christians? The careful interpreter may not always know the full explanation of a passage, but he/she can certainly rule out some things that the passage does *not* mean.

c. Historical background. Set in the closing days of the 1st century, the book reflects the conditions faced by Christians at that time. Heretofore, the Jews or local antagonists had largely inspired persecution. But a new day is approaching, when Satan is expected to stir up greater trouble for the growing Christian population. From a political perspective, Christianity threatens the foundation of Roman power—paganism. From a spiritual perspective, the gospel threatens the power of Satan.

The author of the New Testament Apocalypse. The true author of the book is God, for it reports to be “the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John” (1:1). So, in apocalyptic fashion, the message originates in heaven and is borne to earthlings through a mediator to a human subject. The human subject is John. Tradition is heavily behind the identity of “John” as the apostle by that name and the author of the Gospel of John and the three epistles that bear his name.

The date of Revelation. The date that best fits the writing of Revelation seems to be the 90s C.E. At no other time during the 1st century do we find Roman persecution and the imperial cult to coincide. Domitian was the emperor.

Domitian’s role in the persecution of Christians and Jews is disputed. It is thought by some that Christians were being required to worship the Imperial Cult of Domitian. While it is uncertain to what extent, if any, Domitian enforced adherence to the cult, Roman governors do appear to have enforced it locally to show

loyalty to the Empire. The Apocalypse fits the time frame and seems to address Christians during a time of persecution. Domitian was murdered in 96 in a plot carried out by his enemies in the Senate.

The recipients of Revelation. The book is directed specifically to seven churches, all of which lay in the western part of Asia Minor. We might speculate that the book was intended for a wider immediate audience. The inclusion of only "seven" churches would appear to be part of the symbolism used throughout the book. Hence, the Christians facing persecution would not be confined to seven churches, especially in the region where the Imperial Cult was strong. We assume, therefore, that a secondary audience embraced a wider Christian population, especially that of the late 1st and early 2nd centuries. The modern reader constitutes a third audience—one that looks in on the earlier ones. He/she examines the book within its original setting, and then looks for principles that are timeless in application. Those principles center on the victory of Jesus Christ over Satan. Questions raised for contemporary Christians abound. They pertain to life with a congregation where a vibrant manifestation of love has dissipated. They pertain to a Christian's view of persecution. They pertain to detecting teaching that stands in opposition to the truth of God.

The conditions in the Roman Empire. For the most part, conditions for the spread and growth of Christianity within the Roman Empire had been favorable.

The political setting. When the decade of the 90s began, Domitian had already been emperor of the Roman Empire for nine year. He would continue for another six.

Domitian believed in horoscopes. He craved divine honors. In the end, his reign was bloody and his memory was cursed by both the people and the Senate. With Domitian, the Flavian Dynasty consisting of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian ended.

Domitian's successor, Marcus Cocceius Nerva, was appointed by the Senate at age 61. He became the first of the "Five Good Emperors," who were selected on their merits rather than family connections. Nerva ended Domitian's reign of terror. He release political prisoners, restored confiscated property, and invited the Senate to participate in his rule. But Domitian's supporters in the Praetorian Guard forced Nerva to move against those who murdered Domitian. Nerva adopted the commander of the forces on the German frontier, Trajan, as his successor. Nerva died from natural causes and was deified by the Senate.

Social environment. The period was one of discomfort for Jews. Domitian targeted them, possibly out of fiscal considerations. When it fit his purposes, he accused them of atheism and proselytism. Jews were forced to pay special taxes. Those who failed to do so were found and punished. The emperor executed those he believed to be disloyal. Nerva, Domitian's successor, set aside Domitian's abuses but kept the tax, probably restoring the normal situation (Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting,* p. 9).

Religious climate. The Imperial Cult arose in Asia in keeping with the decrees of Augustus. The king was not cited for his benefactions but out of respect for his actions (Price, *Rituals and Power,* p. 96). Asia Minor was part of the Roman Empire and was organized into provinces, ruled by a governor. Cities maintained the right to determine their own organization but did so in a manner that respected the rule of Rome. Consequently, the Imperial Cult could be met most everywhere. The emperor was represented within local festivals. These festivals may include sacrifices and processions or donations from the elite, who performed the function of imperial priests. The activity was also offered to the gods to gain their favor (Price, *Rituals and Power,* pp. 2-3).

The cost of activities associated with the imperial cult may have been borne by the wealthy, but the festivals themselves were intended for everyone. They were part of the fabric of community life and indicated one's identification with his community (Price, p. 21).

Even though Roman emperors discouraged the multiplication of divine cults, some old ones continued into the 2nd century. But with the end of the Roman Republic, the emperor became supreme. By transferring the object of the divine cult from local rulers to the emperor, the relationship between ruler

and subjects became clear. It is this relationship that defines the meaning of the Imperial cult. Hellenistic cults had emphasized the ruler's benefactions to his people. The decrees of Augustus link the emperor's actions with those of the gods (Price, pp. 49-53, 55).

Some emperors, like Domitian, became passionate about their own position and reacted violently when they perceived a threat to their personal rule. As for deification, emperors were often deified following their deaths, but not all. The Imperial Cult, which revered the ruling emperor, was pretty much an Asian phenomenon, as it became a means to demonstrate the loyalty of the people residing in Asia Minor. Domitian, like other emperors, subscribed to traditional Roman religion and wished to restore ancient Latin gods.

To whatever degree Christians hesitated or refused to respect the emperor as a "god," we do not know. But Domitian's obsessions would have made them uneasy. In the absence of hard evidence, we do not know if the Christians were required to make some sacrifice to the emperor to show their loyalty or to what extent Christians were persecuted under Domitian. But the potential was certainly present and there is testimony to this effect by later religious writers. It is generally understood by Christian writers of the following decades that "under Domitian . . . the Christian community in Rome and Christians in Asia and Palestine suffered distress" (Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak,* p. 14). The circumstance was relaxed with the death of Domitian. The memory of the emperor provoked both Christians and Jews to consider him an agent of Satan.

Unit 2. Revelation 1-3

It is not uncommon for an author to alert his reader as to the general nature of his message and its purpose. This may come at the beginning or elsewhere within the composition. But somewhere, the author often states or hints at the occasion and purpose of writing. Revelation has in common with other literary works the feature of defining itself in the opening phases of the composition. If it is true generally that authors reveal their intentions in writing, then attention should be given to the opening words of this work as well as to other items that may have bearing on the purpose.

No determinations concerning a book's interpretation should be made until the occasion of writing, present circumstances, and the design of the author are analyzed. No theory of interpretation should be adopted that distorts the image of the composition. And no conclusions should be drawn that cannot be substantiated by the book itself.

Taken as a whole, chapters 1-3 form the prologue to the entire book. The prologue sets the stage for what is to follow. It functions in a way similar to the prologue to the Book of Job. Here, instead of setting up the situation that led to a cycle of speeches, Revelation sets up the circumstances of seven churches that lead to a demonstration of God's sovereignty, Christ's redeeming work, and the victory assured those who retain their faith.

The recipients of the seven letters share much in common. Their connection with the Lamb is noted in the individual introductions. They are all related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. What emerges as different is their particular circumstance. Some face persecution. Others have begun to rely upon themselves more than upon God. Still others find themselves being ravaged by false teachers.

The first three chapters of The Apocalypse provide both an introduction and the background for the main body of the book, which begins in chapter four. Following an introduction to the source of the contents, the purpose of the material, the circumstance of the human author, and the specific audience to whom it is directed, The Apocalypse contains unique addresses to seven churches in the western region of modern Turkey. Here, the work assumes the nature of an epistle. For example, the salutation (1:4-11) is similar to other New Testament letters (1:4-11) and chapters 2 and 3 are cast in epistolary style. The symmetry of the section can be seen in the way the Lamb is initially introduced and the partial characteristics are employed in the letters to each of the seven churches.

The letters to the seven churches of Asia raise many practical questions. With respect to Sardis, one gets the picture that most of the congregations needed reformation. Questions that rise from this situation are numerous. Who is responsible for leading the reformation? What should be the attitude of the more "spiritual" toward those who are less spiritual? How should one continue with a church that is dominantly unspiritual? Then in Laodicea, the question that arises may have to do with continuance in a church that is indifferent. A minority cannot always bring about revival or set the path for reformation. The brevity of the letters points to a summary of conditions rather than a detailed analysis. Literary style orchestrates the letters into a composition that shows how the churches form the body of Christ, yet have sour notes created by the dissonance of their misbehavior.

Although it begins as an epistle, the abrupt change in form at chapter 4 is anticipated from chapter 1, verses 1 and 12-20. What begins in epistle genre definitely shifts to apocalyptic genre. But the way the two are woven together alerts us to the plan of the composition. Further, the symmetry of the section (chaps. 1-3) can be seen in the way the Lamb is initially introduced and in the manner the partial characteristics of the Lamb are employed in each of the letters to the seven churches. Through this procedure, the reader is struck with the unity of the text and, more importantly, the unity of divinity and the church's call to holiness.

If we do well in grasping the unique nature of the epistolary section, then we should be prepared to move into the apocalyptic section. The two are connected. First, the seven letters are addressed to seven historical churches. The spiritual character of those churches is reflected in the words Jesus directs to them. Hence, our start is rooted in history and actual events. The unit is divided into three sections: (a) The Lamb (Revelation 1), (b) The Lamb and the churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira (Revelation 2), and (c) The Lamb and the churches: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Revelation 3).

Reading Assignment. Read the first three chapters of Revelation at least three times. Move beyond the points that puzzle you and pick up as much of the overall theme as possible. Do not pause to try to figure out the meaning of the various symbols. But do note that pieces of the symbols introduced in chap. 1 are used selectively in the addresses to the individual churches. Be aware of the close identification of John with the churches. But more than that, observe the place of God and the predominance of Jesus throughout the passage.

a. The Lamb (Revelation 1). The initial chapter mixes literary genre. The entire Book of Revelation is encased in epistolary form (1:4-7; 22:7-21), yet as a “revelation” of things that are coming into being, it partakes of the prophetic spirit. And its symbols demonstrate that the character of the work is heavily apocalyptic. It makes use of Old Testament quotations and casts some of these in poetic form. This makes the book a unique composition.

Besides its epistolary form, the first chapter has been developed on the order of Daniel 2. It reflects the wording of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Following a salutation, the emphasis of the chapter is on the Lamb. The Lamb, Jesus Christ, holds the key to the plight of the believers. Although his ultimate position is not detailed until chapter 5, there is no doubt of his prominent place in the book’s message.

Whereas in the epistles, the christological discussion regarding Jesus is theological in tone, here in Revelation it is more practical. As ruler of the church, Jesus comes to the believers and shows his pleasure and displeasure in what they are doing. His presentation is unmistakable. He holds the authority to act on behalf of the saints, but he also holds them accountable for their conduct.

1:1-3. The opening to the composition establishes the setting. The book contains a message that had its origin with God, which he gave to Jesus. The *plan* of the revelation is to inform believers of what lies ahead in the "near" future. Perhaps the more accurate idea is best expressed as “the definite, imminent time of fulfillment, which has already begun” (cf. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary,* pp. 181-82, 185). But revealing the future is not an end in itself, except in that it points to the climax of God’s intention to establish his spiritual kingdom as foretold in Daniel 2. The

kingdom was indeed established, but the Roman Empire is still in place. That Empire shall not prevail against God's kingdom. Not only did God promise to form his kingdom during the days of the Roman Empire, he promised to shatter that human entity. The Apocalypse is not content to leave the formation of the church/kingdom at Pentecost; it is dedicated to demonstrating its ultimate victory over Rome and Satan who inspires it. The *purpose* is to provide the saints with a heavenly view of redemptive history. The *objective* of Revelation is to encourage faithfulness and stimulate behavior appropriate to the saints of God.

Elsewhere in the book one meets phrases like "I will soon come to you" (Rev. 2:16), "I am coming soon" (Rev. 3:11) and "I will come to you" (Rev. 2:5). These expressions speak of divine action, but they do not suggest end-time judgment.

In typical apocalyptic fashion, the message is borne by an angel, who brings it to a human. In this instance, the revelation is given to John the aged apostle. This message is nothing short of "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ." The Greek word translated "testimony" is the word from which we get "martyr." Everyone who heeds the message is blessed, for the message pertains to a time described as "near" (cf. also 22:10-11).

When we hear of an "angel" involved in the revelation, we have reason to pause. Paul once said, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:8). The writer of Hebrews went to considerable length to demonstrate that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ was superior to the word delivered by angels at Sinai, because it is in Jesus that God has revealed himself ultimately (Hebrews 1-2). Paul warned against the worship of angels (Col. 2:18). So, how is it that we have the final message of the New Testament delivered by an angel? First, Paul's concern was for the preaching of a "different" or "corrupted" gospel. In Revelation, the message is from God through Christ and conforms to the gospel; it is not a corruption. In the second instance, the emphasis is on Jesus, who is the incarnate Word of God. He is superior to angels; consequently, the message he brings from God is superior to that delivered by angels at Sinai. In Revelation, where we are dealing with apocalyptic, the angel is only a messenger for God and Christ. There is no "new" or "different" gospel being proclaimed. The messenger reveals what God and Christ want revealed. That message provides encouragement to those who bear "the testimony of Jesus Christ." As for the idea of angel worship, it is strictly forbidden in Revelation (22:8-9). So, there is no conflict between the idea that an angel is part of the revelation chain and other references to angels. The actual wording is "sending his angel," which sounds a lot like the Old Testament references to "the angel of the LORD." In the Old Testament, the angel of the LORD (Yahweh) is often indistinguishable from Yahweh himself. The emphasis then is upon authority, rather than one or more angels. What the angel delivers is from God himself.

1:4-8. The revealed message is directed specifically to seven congregations of believers. A customary greeting comes from God, the seven spirits before his throne, and Jesus Christ. The position of Christ as the faithful witness, the one who became triumphant over death, and the ruler over all earthly powers is established.

In view of Jesus' exalted position, John breaks out in praise. Jesus loves us, has freed us from sin, and made us a kingdom of priests. John draws from Dan. 7:13, a passage which is interpreted in the New Testament as having to do with the Messiah's exaltation and execution of God's will regarding the worldly order (Matt. 16:27; 24:30-31; 26:64, etc.). The Almighty confirms it.

The seven churches were found within the Roman Province of Asia, which included the western tip of Asia Minor (Western Turkey today). The salutation and benediction are common to what one finds in the New Testament epistles. The human author, John, wishes grace and peace on his readers (1:4; 22:21). But the grace and peace is not his; grace and peace come from God, the seven spirits, and Christ (1:4-5). This grace serves God's people in their faith quest in the face of opposition.

God is described as the One "who is, and who was, and who is to come," a most apt description for an eternal God. The seven spirits before God's throne" appear to be an expression in reference to the Holy

Spirit (cf. 4:5; 5:7), perhaps to be equated with “the seven eyes of the LORD” (Zech. 3:9; 4:10). Christ is noted as “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Within the context of the faithful witnesses and martyrs who are much the subject of Revelation, Christ stands out as “the” faithful witness. He is known elsewhere as “the firstborn from among the dead” (Col. 1:18), that is one in whom resurrection is assured. All things have been placed under his feet (Eph. 1:18-21; Col. 1:16; Hebrews 1). In this one verse is wrapped the essence of the unity of God in three persons, whether expressed as “I am who I am” (Exod. 3:11), “I, the LORD—with the first of them and with the last—I am he” (Isa. 41:4), “Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me” (Isa. 43:10), or “I am the first and I am the last” (Isa. 44:6).

The Holy Spirit is seen before the throne to indicate that the Spirit stands in the presence of God and executes his will among men. The Spirit also enables the saints in their spiritual warfare (see also Rev. 4:5; 5:6).

Jesus is the “faithful witness.” He is the true witness, who withstood Satan and did not resist the cross. He is the witness par excellence and the example for the saints to follow. The expression also has Old Testament precedence (Psa. 89:27, 37).

The making of the saints to be “a kingdom and priests” may be reflective of what God did with Israel at Sinai (Exod. 19:3-6), but it is also a present reality for the saints—the spiritual remnant of Israel (1 Pet. 2:4-5, 9-10). God has indeed accomplished his purposes in his spiritual kingdom. Christ’s faithfulness in his mission has resulted in his being made king and priest over God’s chosen ones.

The poetic verse that occurs in Rev. 1:7 reflects on Old Testament imagery. Coming on the clouds is typical for showing God in judgment. The “one like a son of man” coming with the clouds (Dan. 7:13) associates Jesus with divine judgment. The piercing and mourning draws from Zech. 12:10 and refers to Jesus. The background references indicate God’s actions against those who oppose him and his will. The effect of the entire phrase calls attention to the position of Christ and the certainty of divine judgment against evil. The language is eschatological but does not necessarily refer to a single end-time event (cf. Matt. 24:30). The coming of the divine in judgment points to action relating to the rejection of the authority of God and Jesus. Such action can take place at any time and will certainly be climaxed at the close of history.

1:9-20. John identifies himself as a fellow traveler on the difficult path trod by believers. He too had participated in the sufferings that identify one with Jesus Christ. He himself has been exiled to the small island of Patmos off the Asian coast because of his faith. The suffering and exile were tied directly to his faithfulness to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,” already mentioned in verse 2. Suffering and exile came as a direct result of his dedication to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God who gave himself for man’s redemption and was raised to enable victory over sin.

It was on the Lord's Day (Sunday) when John heard the first proclamation, which he was instructed to write down and send to the seven designated churches. The similarity of John’s posture with that of Ezekiel is evident. Both are “in the Spirit” (see Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, etc.). The surroundings of John are similar to those of Moses at Sinai with the trumpet blast (Exod. 19:16, 19-20). John stands in the same tradition.

The address to “seven” churches suggests completeness. When seven is used elsewhere, it has the same meaning. In the book, we are dealing with the divine. What God does is perfect, complete. The seven churches are, therefore, a representation of his people.

The visions that follow fit the pattern found in the Hebrew Scriptures where apocalyptic is used: vision, response, and interpretation. The vision here “develops the themes of suffering, kingdom, and priesthood . . . and it introduces the new theme of Christ as judge.” John’s response is similar to that of Daniel: observation, fear, divine strengthening, and further revelation (Beale, *The Book of Revelation* in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary,* pp. 206, 213).

John saw seven golden lamp stands with Christ standing among them. The imagery depicts the glorious sight of one who has overtaken death's claim on humanity. No doubt, the lamp stands are reminiscent of the lamp stands in the tabernacle and the temple, where God met his people (Exod. 25:31-40; 1 Kings 7:49; Zechariah 4). The shape is replicated at the Arch of Titus in Rome. The readers would have recognized the significance of the lamps that provided light within the tabernacle and temple of God. They would also have known that the lamps become a symbol for the temple, the presence of God, and his faithful people. So, here the lamp stands are matched with the seven churches, but the lamps themselves represent the Spirit of God (Rev. 4:6; cf. Zech. 4:2-5). The connection between the churches and the Spirit should be obvious. The Holy Spirit empowers the churches. In doing so, the connection between the churches and God's spiritual rule is established.

Being described as someone "like a son of man" recalls Dan. 7:13, where Daniel saw in a vision one of this description approaching the Ancient of Days (God). Surely, the scene is preparing John and his readers for some message that is coming from God. But the lamps will soon be identified more closely as God's people

While it is tempting to attempt to identify the meaning of the different features of the clothing worn by the one "like a son of man," it is probably best to exercise restraint. The main point is, he is one of authority and functions here as high priest (1:13-16). However, it should be observed that, while not identical, the imagery is inspired to describe the Ancient of Days (God). Jesus is described in Revelation in a manner similar to the way God was described in Daniel 7:9-12.

The calendar is once more set forth in v. 19: "what is now and what will take place later." What is "now" may refer to circumstances surrounding the seven churches. It may also pertain to the spiritual battle that is already engaged.

When studying apocalyptic, the reader should always pay attention to symbols that are interpreted in the text. At first sight, the significance of the seven stars (v. 16) and the seven lamp stands (v. 12) was a mystery to John. The stars represent the angels of the churches; the lamp stands represent the seven churches that will be addressed.

The word "angel" is used in some translations; it is sometimes understood simply as the messenger to the churches, whether heavenly or otherwise. The most logical interpretation here is that Jesus held "authority" over the churches and he was sending them messages, which had heavenly content. Whether he intends the angels were heavenly beings who had special responsibility for the churches or were the metaphorical references to those who delivered the messages is disputed. One need go no further in trying to identify the angels here.

b. The Lamb and the churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira (Revelation 2). The recipients of the seven letters share much in common. Their connection with the Lamb is noted in the introductions. They are all related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. What emerges as different is the particular circumstance of each. Some face persecution. Others have begun to rely upon themselves more than upon God. Still others find themselves being infested by false teachers.

Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7). Ephesus is the first church addressed. Coming from Patmos, this would have been the first location the messenger would reach as he traveled to the mainland.

Historical setting. Human occupation in the area dates from the 1200s B.C.E., although the legendary formation of a "city" there by Androklos, an exiled prince of Athens, dates from the 900s. Ephesus was invaded about 650 by the Cimmerians and destroyed. When the city reemerged, it produced some significant cultural leaders: grammarians, philosophers, painters, physicians, poets, and satirists. Under the Lydians, who came about 560, the city became wealthy and influential, but ultimately fell to Cyrus and the Persians. It remained part of the Persian Empire from 547 to 479 and under Persian influence for another century and a half. The link with the Greeks was strengthened in several concerted efforts to oust Persia from Asia Minor. With the coming of Alexander the Great in 334, the city came under Greek

control. During the rule of Alexander's successors, the city passed to the control of the Seleucids of Syria and was relocated. From 263 to 197, Egypt took control of the area. Seleucid attempts to reclaim Ephesus were unsuccessful and the region fell to Eumenes II, the king of Pergamum, in 197. Eumenes' childless grandson bequeathed Ephesus to the Romans.

Once under Roman control, the city's economic base eroded. An insurrection in 88 B.C.E. led to the destruction of the city by the Romans. There was great loss of life in and around Ephesus, but the city gained two years of independence. Re-conquest by Rome brought greater economic hardship. Ephesus became the capital of the Province of Asia in 27, when Augustus became emperor.

Cultural setting. Already in the 3rd century B.C.E., Ephesus had emerged as a vital center for Mediterranean commerce. The present ruins are of buildings constructed from the time of Augustus. After suffering a setback by the earthquake of 17 C.E., the city once again became the prime commercial center in the region. Its citizens enjoyed a cultured and prosperous standard of life. When Paul arrived in the city, the population probably exceeded 400,000 residents, the most of any city in the Province of Asia.

Additionally, Ephesus was a center for philosophy and the bastion for the worship of Artemis. As worshipers of idols, the citizens of Ephesus would have followed an indigenous code of ethics.

The culture is described as Ionian but influences from the East as well as from Rome could be felt. What one might expect in any large city of its type could be found—agora, bath, library, temples, amphitheater. Craftsmen of all sorts, priests, and merchants worked their trades. Past time activities included the brothel and other entertainment to satisfy the cravings of men.

Religious setting. The chief goddess of Ephesus, Artemis, was, in Greek mythology, the daughter of Zeus and Leto and the twin of Apollo. She became the goddess of the hills and forests—the wild countryside. But she was also worshiped as the mother goddess. In Roman times, Artemis became associated with Diana. The worship of Artemis was not limited to Ephesus, but Ephesus became her guardian. The Ephesian temple has been called one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The Jewish population of Ephesus was significant. According to Josephus, Jews in Ephesus had been granted the right to exercise their own religious customs, including keeping the Sabbath. The emperor Augustus later confirmed these privileges. The Jews were exempt from Roman military service (*Antiquities of the Jews,* 14.10.223-29; 16.6.1-2; 160-65). But even so, under Augustus, there was pressure on the Jews by the pagans to worship the local gods. Although the Jews of Ephesus were Hellenized, there is no record that Jews were forced to pay homage to idols.

The church in Ephesus. For the history of the church in Ephesus, we need to begin with Acts 19. When Paul first set foot in the city seven or eight years earlier, he met a dozen disciples who had not been baptized properly. With more accurate teaching, these were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then, Paul went to the synagogue, where he reasoned about the kingdom of God for three months. He withdrew from the synagogue due to opposition to his message and began daily teaching elsewhere in the city. Paul was in Ephesus for a total of three years (Acts 20:31). During the last two of those years, he taught disciples who carried the gospel throughout the Roman Province of Asia. Paul's ongoing preaching and miracles among the Gentiles in Ephesus created an economic crisis for the silversmiths, who relied on the purchase of images of Artemis. Finally, due to an uproar, Paul was forced to leave Ephesus.

Spiritual warfare. Perhaps the most relevant background for appreciating the epistle to the Ephesians is that of spiritual warfare. The common battle is presented as being with principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This is plainly demonstrated in the account of Paul's preaching in Ephesus. Some unbelieving Jews attempted to drive out evil spirits by evoking the name of Jesus but were themselves afflicted by demons (Acts 19:13-16). Sorcery was widely practiced and became the focus of attention in preaching the gospel (Acts 19:19).

Because the central shrine of Artemis was located in Ephesus, along with images to other gods, the gospel also targeted idolatry. The gospel was so convincing that many forsook their leading goddess. Gentile converts understood that the call of God allowed no compromise with the doctrines of demons. New believers burned their scrolls on sorcery. In the epistle, equipping oneself with armor appropriate for this spiritual battle is urged.

Jews and Gentiles. A second background to Ephesians lies with Jewish-Gentile relationships. Much is said about unity in Christ and that unity is brought about through the cross. Initially, the gospel went to the Jews of Ephesus. The first converts were Jews (Acts 19:8-9). But then when Paul turned his attention to the Gentiles, a substantial quantity of Gentile was added (Acts 19:10-27) and the numbers seem to have tilted toward the non-Jewish population (see Acts 20:21).

The Hebrew Scriptures. A third area that will give the reader a foundation for the study of Ephesians is Jewish literature. The Old Testament prepares one to understand the work of God in Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of the "mystery" that pertained to the manner in which God would fulfill his promise to Abraham to bless all peoples through his descendants. This plan was a mystery to the minds of men until God revealed it through Jesus and through the apostles (Eph. 3:3; Gal. 4:4-5; 1 Pet. 1:10-12).

The letter to the church at Ephesus. Each of the letters employs a portion of the imagery used to describe Jesus in chapter one. The display shows that the Christ is addressing each church, and he does so with authority. Can you find the distinguishing characteristics used in the address to the Ephesians? He is the one who holds the seven stars and walks among the lamp stands. Christ knows their deeds, hard work, and perseverance. He also knows they do not tolerate the wicked and put to the test those who falsely claim to speak with the authority of the apostles. They have endured hardship and been faithful to the name of Jesus. They have stood against the teaching of the Nicolaitans, those whom we suppose taught a compromising position with the world. Is this not a worthy testimony to the fidelity of people? So why would Christ threaten to remove his recognition from those who have defended the cause of their Master so strongly? Look at verse 4.

No matter how diligent a church may be, if it has lost the essential life blood of what distinguishes it as part of the kingdom of God, it is living dangerously close to be expunged. Jesus had upheld the ideal that the greatest commandment is to love God first and one's fellow humans second (Matt. 22:34-39; cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). The apostle John had emphasized the essential link between truth and love (2 John). Somehow, the church had distinguished itself with regard to the "truth," but it had lost the "love" aspect, which was an essential witness to the truth. Repentance and a return to a full commitment to their Lord would lead to being able to eat from the tree of life—to enjoy life with God. The tree of life was removed from man's access in the Garden of Eden following the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:22), but it shall be made available to them (Rev. 22:1-5).

Smyrna (2:8-11). An Ionian city located on the coast of the Aegean Sea, Smyrna was the second city visited by the messenger. The Lydians took the city in the 7th century B.C.E. But about 300, Alexander the Great took it and began to Hellenize it. The city had been prosperous until the earthquake of 178 B.C.E. As the Romans began their ascendancy, Smyrna aligned itself with Rome instead of Pergamum. Though they had many gods that reflected their Greek culture, they began to pay tribute to Roman religion to show their loyalty.

The Letter to the church at Smyrna. What part of the imagery from chapter 1 is used here? Does he not combine the sense of eternity with the act of redemption? Would you say the language of the text suggests the Christians in Smyrna were impoverished in a physical way, but not in spiritual matters? What kind of opposition had they encountered? Were they about to suffer more? If so, what did Jesus promise?

Mention of the Jews suggests unbelieving Jews were allied with the Romans. Enjoying certain freedoms, they claimed to be true Jews, while Christians were not. In reality, those who accepted Christ as the Messiah were the true Jews. Persecution was coming for the Christian, but their fidelity would result in receipt of the crown of life. The "crown" of life is eternal life itself.

Pergamum (2:12-17). The city became the center of a significant kingdom during the Hellenistic period, being ruled by the Attalid dynasty (281-133 B.C.E.). King Attalus III bequeathed Pergamum to the Romans in 133. It was a city of temples. The city's location sixteen miles from the Aegean Sea made it the third stop of the messenger bearing the Revelation.

Note the imagery that refers to Jesus—the one "who has the sharp, double-edged sword" (v. 12). The reference to Satan's throne is not specifically linked with Jewish unbelief as suggested by the reference to Smyrna—"a synagogue of Satan." We suspect that here in Pergamum, the reference is to pagan worship. A second notation is made—"where Satan lives." In the midst of this environment, Christians at Pergamum had remained true to Christ. They remained unwavering even though one of their number, Antipas, paid the price with his life. But while their faithfulness is extolled, the church there took a soft view of those among them who believed in compromise. The example of Balaam is given to reinforce the nature of their insufficiency. They must deal with those who approve of participating in idol worship through eating meat they believe to have been sacrificed to idols. They must turn from sexual immorality that was often associated with pagan worship. They must confront the Nicolaitans, who seemed to be of a similar ilk.

Thyatira (2:18-29). Moving nearly 50 miles inland from the Aegean Sea, the messenger would come to Thyatira. The city was originally a Macedonian colony, which engaged in the worship of Apollo, Asclepias, Artemis, and Dionysus. It became famous for its dyeing, where its trade guilds outnumbered those of other city in the Province of Asia. These included guilds for workers in leather, linen, wool, baking, bronze, pottery, and even slave trade. This was the city of Lydia, whom Paul taught at Philippi (Acts 16:13-15).

Evidently, there was much to commend the church at Thyatira. The Lord extols them for their deeds, love, faith, service, perseverance, and even increasing display of affection for Christ. With this kind of resume, why would Christ threaten to discipline them? Naming someone among them "Jezebel" recalls an Old Testament character by that name. Jezebel was the wife of Ahab and devotee to Canaanite worship (see 1 Kings 18). At Thyatira, there was such a person who called herself a prophetess. The church tolerated her. She influenced believers there to participate in the sexual immorality associated with pagan worship. The promise to those who did not succumb to Jezebel's teaching is association with the Christ in his rule over the nations. The quotation is from Psalm 2 and describes the sovereign rule of the anointed of God.

c. The Lamb and the churches: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Revelation 3)

Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6). Sardis is located seven miles east of Smyrna, along a highway that connected the interior of the country with the Mediterranean Sea. The history of the city dates from before the 8th century B.C.E., when it was the capital of the Lydian Empire. Sardis passed to the control of the Cimmerians (7th century B.C.E.), then to the Persians and Greeks (6th century). The Seleucid ruler, Antiochus III assumed its master in the 3rd century B.C.E. When Rome extended its empire over Asia Minor, Sardis became a Roman possession. In 17 C.E., an earthquake destroyed the city. After rebuilding, Sardis emerged as a significant city in the area.

To Sardis, Jesus is represented as the one "who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." He had already used the seven stars symbolism to the church at Ephesus. The use of the two here emphasizes his authority to address them. He is the one associated with the Spirit and with the messengers to the churches. The message is startling. The church had a good reputation among humans, but internally, the church was "dead." The congregation as a whole is admonished to "wake up," strengthen what remains, and repent. There were a few in Sardis who were faithful to God's call and they were promised victory. He does not offer specifics as to the nature of their offences; surely they could figure that out.

Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7-13). Dating from 189 B.C.E., Philadelphia received its name from King Eumenes II of Pergamum, who founded the city. The name recognized the love he had for his brother, Attalus II, who succeeded him. When Attalus II died (133 B.C.E.), he bequeathed the kingdom to the Romans, who

made it part of the newly formed Province of Asia (129 B.C.E.). In 17 C.E., the city was destroyed by an earthquake, but was rebuilt by Tiberius.

Reference to a church at Philadelphia is first found here in Revelation. We read of the church later in the writings of Ignatius (about 112). Ignatius found a united church, but one surrounded by false teachers and exponents of Judaism. He painted the false teachers as schismatics and wolves who advocated wicked pleasures. He warned against frauds and traps set by "the ruler of this world" (Ignatius, Phila. 2, 6). Ignatius describes the situation at Philadelphia much as the letter to them in Revelation.

What parts of the symbolism regarding Jesus are used in the address to the Philadelphians (v. 7)? The letter to Philadelphia comes from the one "who is holy and true, who holds the key of David." He maintains authority over circumstances that affect the church. What is the spiritual status of the church in Philadelphia (vv. 8, 10)? He acknowledges the faithfulness of the body against those who claim to be true children of God, but who deny Christ as his Son. Who are those "who are of the synagogue of Satan"? Notice the following line about them. Is the emphasis not on their denial of Jesus and his teaching on his love for his people? What special blessing will Jesus give the Philadelphians in "the hour of trial"? What is the purpose for the hour of trial? What does the expression "I am coming soon" convey? Look at the statement in connection with the coming of the hour of trial. The coming of Christ here does not necessarily refer to the end of the world but to Jesus' coming in judgment. The crown of v. 11 refers to life, not to a physical crown placed on the head. What does Jesus promise to the faithful in Philadelphia (v. 12).

Laodicea (3:14-22). The last city on the circuit, Laodicea, was located on an east to west travel route in the Lycus River Valley. Founded around 260 B.C.E. by the Seleucid king, Antiochus II, the city received its name from the king's wife. The city was known for its agriculture, banking, medicine, and black wool. In 60 C.E., the city was damaged heavily in an earthquake. In 79 an amphitheater was dedicated to Vespasian.

The church in Laodicea is known to us from Paul's letter to the Colossians (Col. 2:1; 4:13-16). Of its earlier history, we know nothing else. There is indication that there once existed a "letter from Laodicea," but of its contents we are not informed; we only know Paul asked the Colossians to read it.

What characteristics of Christ do you find used to introduce the letter to the Laodiceans? Is he not "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation"? All but the "Amen" is found in the salutation (1:5); the "Amen" is assumed from the description. Jesus is the "So be it!"

The church at Laodicea stands alone in not having some commendation. Although it had a notable past, the church is unhealthy spiritually. What was there about the church in Laodicea that led Christ to say that because they were lukewarm, he would spit them out of his mouth? But, was their plight hopeless? What were they called to do to regain Christ's favor?

Observations. Questions raised for contemporary Christians abound. They pertain to life with a congregation where their first love has evaporated. They pertain to persecution. They pertain to detecting teaching that stands in opposition to the truth of God. With respect to Sardis, one gets the picture that most of the congregation needed reformation. Who is responsible for leading the reformation? What should be the attitude of the more "spiritual" toward those who are less spiritual? How should one continue with a church that is dominantly unspiritual? Then in Laodicea, questions that arise have to do with continuance in a church that is indifferent. A minority cannot always bring about revival or set the path for productivity. But all share in the responsibility for righteousness. Answers to these questions are not necessary for exegesis, but they are important for application in the modern church. Solid exegesis precedes hermeneutics; hermeneutics should not move past the principles established by exegesis.

If it is true that The Apocalypse continues the theme of Daniel in the sense that the kingdom of God will not only come but will overcome human kingdoms, then the letters to the seven churches provide insight into how "churches" should behave in the light of their position under the reign of God. There is much to commend the churches. At the same time, their compromise with a world controlled by Satan is serious.

We may concluded that these churches are expected to defend the faith, be intolerant of evil, commit to the love of God, keep from associating themselves with idolatrous worship that includes immorality, and find satisfaction in earthly poverty and heavenly riches.

We may also glean that the mission of the kingdom of God is not defined by the social gospel, liberation theology, or the gospel of prosperity. It is not identified with civil religion, Christendom, or a physical kingdom. The kingdom of God by its nature is spiritual in character; it is divinely redeemed, divinely driven, and divinely judged.

Unit 3. Revelation 4-22

The core of the Apocalypse presents the spiritual crisis faced by those who bear the testimony of Jesus Christ. Perhaps if more attention had been given to Jesus' references to Satan and to epistolary references to the spiritual battle in which Christians are engaged (Eph. 6:10-17; 1 Pet. 5:8, etc.), modern believers would have been better prepared for The Apocalypse.

At the time of writing, some had already died because they remained faithful to the testimony; others faced an uncertain future. Perhaps two leading questions entered the minds of the recipients of the work. First, Of what benefit is faith in Christ if it costs us hardship? Second, What will God do to avenge the blood of those who give their lives for Christ? At least one other question was answered, though not asked. That question pertained to the meaning of “faithfulness.” This question was effectively answered in chapters 2 and 3.

Through dramatization, the book answers the burning questions in the minds of the saints. The drama shows that God will indeed act! His action shall bring both salvation to the persecuted and retribution to the evil forces that inflict persecution. But there is a larger issue lying behind the idea of affliction and revenge. This issue touches the nature of God himself and the nature of life on earth. The two are inseparably linked, as is the destiny of mankind.

What is clear within The Apocalypse is that a spiritual battle rages throughout the universe. Can and will God act to terminate evil forces, which at the moment appear to be triumphant? The answer is, Yes! Since God is sovereign and righteous, he will bring the evil powers to a conclusion, and he will do it in his own time. In fact, the triumph for believers has already taken place through the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ. There is no doubt as to outcome--just the timing.

As for the timing, the activity of God lies under his control. We know only what he reveals. But a word of caution is needed here. Remember, we are dealing with cosmic forces in apocalyptic writing. The idea that the revelation pertains to “what must soon take place” and “the time is near,” does not necessarily carry with it the idea that one can point to specific events and identify these with the dramatic presentation being made. God does not operate according to a human timetable. Nor does he accommodate man’s curiosity and give him a blueprint of historical events. God deals more with the abstract.

The text is woven together with the opening of the seventh seal that leads to the blowing of seven trumpets. The sounding of the seventh trumpets leads to seven bowls of wrath and the climax of the composition. The sequence of events suggests both one-time actions and repetitive action. Perhaps the detail should not be pressed in the general message of the drama. This is one of the places where scholars spin their theories of interpretation—over whether what is symbolized is continuous history or repetitive actions for emphasis sake.

When working with this section of text, one should realize that a natural break does appear between chapters 11 and 12. The break is more literary than substantive. Chapters 12-14 focus on a drama that involves the people of God in the midst of the forces inspired by Satan to destroy them. God’s people are in his embrace. But, as chapters 13 and following demonstrate, the efforts of Satan will be defeated.

The same general message of The Apocalypse remains true today. We need not treat the book as a commentary on history or a road map to future historical events. Though based in historical circumstances and no doubt pointing to specific moments in history, its themes are spiritualized. The promise of ultimate victory of righteousness over evil is assured by the actions in Christ. What we need to do is to believe the message, receive strength from it, and engage the spiritual forces with awareness and confidence. The three sections of text before us are (a) God, the Lamb, and the scroll (Revelation 4-5), (b) The Lamb opens the seals (Revelation 5-11), and (c) The Lamb and the conflict (Revelation 12-22).

a. God, the Lamb, and the scroll (Revelation 4-5). The drama about to be presented opens with a heavenly scene. God is depicted as sitting on his throne. While no physical description is given of God, the visual image surely describes him as sovereign. And he holds in his hand a scroll, which contains the desired revelation of future events. However, no one on earth, below the earth, or in the heavens is worthy to take the scroll and open it. It is sealed. Ultimately, one steps forward who is worthy and authorized to take the scroll and open it. That one is the Lamb, Christ. Like God, Christ is worthy of praise and adoration.

Reading Assignment. Read Revelation 4-5 at least three times. Pay special attention to the position of the occupant of the throne and the one who is worthy to take the seal from his hand and open it.

The holy God (Revelation 4). Chapter 4 is a necessary beginning, for it depicts the sovereign personality who both constituted the universe and controls its destiny.

The opening verse introduces the scene. John sees an open door and hears a loud voice (cf. Rev. 1:10) that invites him to enter into the heavenly realm for the purpose of learning future events (4:1). The phrase “After this I looked” or “After this I saw” is a formula used to introduce new visions (7:1, 9, 15:5; 18:1).

John informs us he was “in the Spirit” (cf. 1:10) and was privy to see God on his throne. Note that God is not described in physical terms, but physical elements are used to represent what John saw (Rev. 4:2-3). What elements are employed?

The scene shifts from the One who sits on the throne to those who surround the throne. These numbered twenty-four. They are called “elders,” and they too are seated on thrones. Their attire suggests victory. But the real center of attention is the throne of God, complete with blazing lamps and the “seven spirits of God.” Around the throne are four living creatures that represent all created life. It is not their look that dominates the scene, but their words: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (4:4-8). Furthermore, the elders join in praise to God (4:9-11). The scene is reminiscent of what is found in Isa. 6:2-3 and Ezek. 1:3-28.

The “seven spirits” can also be translated the “sevenfold Spirit.” We should not look for seven distinct Holy Spirits, but to the completeness of God as expressed through his Spirit who forms an essential part of divinity.

While we do not know for certain what the “twenty-four” elders represent, many think it is a figure that is inclusive for the twelve tribes of Israel plus the twelve apostles. Hence, if so, the whole of God’s covenant people are represented by these elders.

The praise of verse 11 is written in verse and resembles Hebrew poetry in structure. The first line acknowledges God is worthy of praise. The second line goes with the first and explains he is worthy “to receive glory and honor and power.” The next three lines complement the first two. They explain why God is worthy to receive praise. First, he created all things. Second, all things were created by his will. Third, all things have their being in him. All three lines affirm the same truth but put a slight twist on each assertion.

Now, review the entire chapter. Who is the focus of attention? What leads you to conclude that God is the focus of attention? Note how different the God of Scripture appears than the gods of the Gentile world. We are looking at absolute monotheism. What follows in the next chapter will in no way detract from God's oneness. It will only reinforce his oneness. It will enlighten the reader as to the nature of God's person and the nature of the reality that revolves around God's person.

Worthy is the Lamb (Revelation 5). Chapter 5 presents Christ as the one who, because of his redeeming work, is worthy of the same praise as God. He, therefore, is able to take the scroll from God's hand and reveal its contents.

The chapter begins with notice of the scroll in God's hand and no one seemingly has the authority to open the seals that conceal its meaning. We continue to find the use of the number seven—seven spirits, seven stars, seven churches, seven seals, seven thunders. The number will continue to be employed in reference to trumpets and bowls of wrath. The number seven is symbolic of completeness.

Attention is immediately focused on Jesus, who is described simultaneously as "the lion of the tribe of Judah" and "the Root of David." These are clear identifications with Old Testament ideology and link Jesus with the promises of God through the ancient Hebrews. By birth, Jesus was descended from Abraham through his great grandson Judah. This was the tribe of David, from whom the legitimate king of the Jews came. Then Jesus is acknowledged as "a Lamb." This terminology identifies him with the work of redemption. It should not be surprising that Jesus is called a "lamb." Students of scripture would know the background of the term from Isa. 53:7-8, a passage which is interpreted in Acts 8:32-35 as having its fulfillment in Jesus.

Theophany, the manifestation of God, was familiar to his audience from the Scriptures (Isa. 6:1-5; Ezekiel 1). They would recognize that the source of the message they were receiving was from God himself. What is unique about this theophany is the appearance of Jesus. Christians, of course, would have no difficulty identifying Jesus with God, but the idea of Jesus as the only one who was qualified to take the scroll from God's hand reinforces his position.

To those familiar with Ezekiel, the idea of a scroll in God's hand would be familiar. In that instance, the writing contained "words of lament and mourning and woe" (Ezek. 2:9). These words were given to the prophet, and they presented a bleak picture to the citizens of Judah on the eve of the destruction of Jerusalem. A major difference between the Ezekiel reference and this one is that the one authorized to break the seals and reveal the contents is Jesus Christ.

The scene depicted in chapter 5 is rather simple, as far as interpretation is concerned. While no one in all of creation was authorized to unseal the document held in God's hand, Jesus Christ was able to open it because he had brought redemption to the human family through the cross. As a result of his sacrifice, the redeemed had become a kingdom and priests to serve God. In this role, they "reign" on the earth. Those whose temporal rule is authorized by Satan may persecute them, but they are the ones who belong to God and are his true representatives on earth. But the attention is not on the saints; it is on Christ, who is worthy of praise. Christ accomplished God's purposes and is worthy of the same honor as given to God himself. Consequently, he is worthy to open the seals and declare what the Father wishes to reveal to his servants.

b. The Lamb opens the seals (Revelation 6-11). The opening of the seals reveals a series of actions that depict spiritual warfare and the plight of those who have been martyred for the testimony of Jesus. Even here, the protection of the righteous is symbolized through the sealing of 144,000 (symbolic of Israel) and a multitude dressed in white robes. What follows is judgment upon evil forces.

Sealing a document in antiquity certified the contents. It also meant that only the one with the authority to open the document would be allowed to do so. In the case of the scroll, which Christ took from God, seven seals kept its contents a mystery.

Reading Assignment. Read Revelation 6-11 at least three times.

The first seal (6:1-2). With the opening of the first seal, there appeared a rider on a white horse holding a bow. He is given a crown and rides out as a conqueror. White usually symbolizes victory. The symbolism is similar to that of Zech. 6:1-8. As in that reference, there are four chariots pulled by different colored horses. The horses are identified as the "four spirits of heaven, going out from standing in the presence of the Lord of the whole earth." Clearly, in both Zechariah and Revelation, the symbols represent an action engineered by God. God works in his world.

The second seal (6:3-4). Under the second seal is a rider on a red horse who is capable of making war and taking life. Red normally signifies blood. The particular ideas suggested under the several seals together portray both the right and the will of God to enter into judgment at his pleasure.

The third seal (6:5-6). As the third seal is opened, a rider on a black horse with a pair of scales projects that darker days are coming. Food will be rationed. Rationing is a normal consequence of warfare. So, the third seal simply extends the ideas set forth in the preceding.

The fourth seal (6:7-8). The next seal reveals a rider on a pale horse. He is associated with widespread death caused by war, famine, and plague. In addition to food rationing, war brings death and plague. Again, the fourth seal extends the picture presented under the preceding seals.

The fifth seal (6:9-11). *The scene changes when the fifth seal is opened. Attention is drawn to those who have been martyred because of their faith. They ask how long it will be until their deaths are avenged. In response to their cry, they are given assurance of victory, are told others must also die for their faith, and that in time their blood will be avenged.*

The sixth seal (6:12-7:17). Seal six reveals an earthquake, but the text is clear that this is not treated as an ordinary natural occurrence. In apocalyptic fashion, all elements of the universe react in extra-ordinary ways. The context shows the action is symbolic, for all the mountains and islands disappear, only to have unbelievers cry out for the mountains and rocks to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of God. The emphasis is not on the earthquake and attendant catastrophes, but on the lack of readiness of the unbelievers to stand before God.

Chapter 7 looks very much like a flashback, for the four angels are preventing judgment upon the unrighteous until the believers are shielded—marked, acknowledged. First, attention is given to Israel. Ancient Israel consisted of thirteen tribes, with the thirteenth (Levi) being the priestly tribe. Normally, reference is made to "twelve" tribes. The listing includes twelve tribes, but Levi is substituted for Dan. Dan was a small tribe, so it seemed natural to simply include Levi because of its significance. The wholeness of the people chosen by God to fulfill his purpose is represented in twelve tribes and each of these by 12,000 from each. The multiplication of 12 times 1,000 symbolizes completeness. Hence, all those who are faithful to God are recognized by him (7:1-8).

But the symbolism does not stop with the faithful from the tribes of Israel. John sees a great multitude drawn from "every nation, tribe, people and language" standing in the presence of God and the Lamb. They are the victorious ones, who have been faithful through the tribulation that befalls those who are true to the testimony of Jesus Christ. The victorious in turn praise God (7:9-17).

The seventh seal (8:1-6). The last seal opens with silence—silence before the storm. There follows the blast of seven trumpets. Normally, trumpets were used to sound a warning and issue a call to battle. Here, the blast of the trumpet is associated with the pouring out of affliction. Note the interplay between the Christians and their world. Christians pray. The nature of their prayers are not specified, but the context leads us to think they lamented to God because of their situation and they offered prayers appropriate for believers—prayers for their enemies and requests for divine support in their affliction. In conjunction with his nature, his will, and the cry of the saints, God's intent to act is symbolized by the angel's hurling fire to the earth.

The first trumpet blast (8:7). Following the sounding of the first trumpet came upon the earth hail and fire mixed with blood. The effect was destruction of one third of the earth, trees, and grass. Rather than looking for a literal interpretation, look for a symbolic one.

The second trumpet blast (8:8-9). With the second trumpet came a blazing mountain thrown into the sea. As a third of the sea turned into blood, one third of the sea creatures died and one third of the ships were destroyed.

The third trumpet blast (8:10-11). The result of the third trumpet was a blazing star contaminated the earth's fresh water, causing people to die.

The fourth trumpet blast (8:12-13). The fourth sounding trumpet yielded the striking of one-third of the sun, moon, and stars, with the effect of dimming light upon the earth. At this venture, a series of woes is pronounced in view of events to follow the blowing of the next three trumpets.

The fifth trumpet blast (9:1-12). With the blowing of the fifth trumpet, attention shifts from physical elements to Satan. He is described as a "star that had fallen from the sky to the earth." Satan controls the Abyss from which he afflicts unbelievers. Locusts become the symbol of his power to afflict. This is the first woe.

Satan's locusts were given power to destroy, but they could harm "only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads," a reference back to 7:2. Satan is presented as the very opposite of God. He is associated with evil and destruction. But he cannot gain control over those under God's protection!

The sixth trumpet blast (9:13-11:14). When the sixth trumpet sounds, a large army is dispatched to kill one third of mankind. John describes what he saw as a vision. The description is symbolic and should not be pressed for identification with a particular world power. The action is punitive, yet those who survived did not repent of their allegiance to Satan or idols. Neither did they turn from their acts of violence, magic, immorality, or disregard for the belongings of others.

Following the events just described, John saw an angel portrayed as robed in a cloud, with a rainbow, a shining face, and strong fiery legs. The angel was holding a small scroll containing content that was not to be revealed (10:1-4). The full mystery of God is about to be accomplished. This is the mystery of which the prophets spoke concerning God's divine kingdom (10:7). Perhaps Dan. 2:44 is the key to this verse.

John was told to take the scroll and eat it. This is reminiscent of the events described in Ezekiel, where the prophet was told to eat a scroll containing lament, mourning, and woe. It was as sweet as honey in his mouth but the words were addressed to Jews who would not listen (Ezekiel 2-3). The similarity is striking. The message is sweet, for it is from God. But it is sour, because it contains a message of judgment that John is about to declare to the unbelieving world.

Meanwhile, the drama includes two "witnesses." John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the temple of God and to count the worshippers. Remember, the physical temple had been destroyed a quarter of a century previous to this time. But the physical temple is the point of reference, with its inner court and court of the Gentiles. The measuring is similar to the sealing. It sets the boundaries and identifies the people of faith.

What we find next is a conflict between believers and unbelievers. The conflict runs for forty-two months or 1,260 days, alternative ways of representing three and one-half years time. No doubt, this represents a period of suffering for the faithful. But amidst the assault, God's two witnesses speak of God and his judgment against evil. The witnesses are identified with two olive trees and two lamp stands. In Zechariah, similar language is found, with a lamp stand and two olive trees. These are said to be "the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth" (Zechariah 4). The language is suggestive of the priest and the king. The symbolism is important, not the number of lamp stands here in contrast to the

seven found in Revelation 1. It is questionable as to whether we should even try to identify the witnesses further. The witnesses affirm that God's word goes out and that it stands against the forces of evil that attempt to destroy God's saints. As for the number of months or days, the imagery is similar to that found in Daniel 12. As there, so here, the interest of the reference is not to a specific period of time, but to the fact that the evil forces will prevail for a short time, but not ultimately. Recalling the days of Elijah, God acts through his witnesses. Again, the language does not favor two human beings who are able to shut up the heavens and induce famine. Remember, the "witnesses" stand in the presence of God and are merely shown here in physical form. The symbolism is pressed to the extreme. God's witnesses are eventually overcome by Satan and slain. Those dedicated to evil rejoiced momentarily, until they realized the witnesses were from God. They were resurrected and returned to him. The place where all this activity is going on is Jerusalem, which is identified as the place where Jesus was crucified, and is equated with Sodom and Egypt—places symbolic of citadels of evil. The drama brings to mind the parable of the man who sent his servants and then his son to collect revenue from his vineyard (Matt. 21:33-46). The original audience of Revelation would have had no difficulty identifying with the drama and would not be looking for a specific timetable of events. Satan is active; he causes grief; he silences those who preach against him; but he shall ultimately be judged in God's own time.

The seventh trumpet blast (11:15-19). The message of the seventh trumpet is that "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ." What follows is the eruption of thanks and praise to God for the accomplishment. A heavenly scene appears that depicts God's temple in heaven and the ark of the covenant. Appropriately, natural forces break forth in recognition. There is no contradiction here with 21:22, which says there is no temple in heaven. We are dealing with symbolic language. At the seventh trumpet blast, John sees a heavenly scene that communicates to Jewish believers and others knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures the idea that God is victorious. The significant thing is that the events are heavenly events, not earthly ones.

c. The Lamb and the conflict (Revelation 12-22). As the spiritual battle is symbolized through the images of a woman and the dragon, one gets the impression that the church and Roman authorities are pitted against one another. Satan lies behind the evil of Rome. Later mention of Babylon reflects the Old Testament identification of Babylon with evil and, in so doing, depicts Rome. In the end, the Lamb, who has already overcome the forces of evil, steps in. God destroys the forces of evil represented by Rome and ultimately binds Satan. Satan's rule is limited and is ultimately ended altogether. As for the believers, their future is one of bliss in the presence of God.

Reading Assignment. Read Revelation 12-22 at least three times. It is more important that you get the overall idea than that you understand every detail. Note that as you read, both judgment and victory are depicted. Remember, you are dealing with apocalyptic and the reflection on earth of a cosmic battle in the spiritual realm. Satan is the enemy of God. Men either align themselves with God or with Satan. God and his saints are the victorious ones. Divine judgment faces Satan and those who become his instruments. Hopefully, some of the details will become more evident as we begin to look at the passages more closely.

The Lamb and the conflict (Rev. 12:1-20:10).The drama continues. The scope widens to include the entire domain of evil. The ultimate victory of righteousness is complete.

Structurally, chapter 12 marks a new section. Attention shifts to a spiritual battle described as a dragon chasing a woman and her child. In chapter 13 we are introduced to two beasts—one out of the sea and one out of the earth. These are assistants of Satan. But in chapter 14, the people of God are found to be under the protection of God and the enemy of God's people is judged. The drama is not over yet, for chapters 15 and 16 describe the pouring out of God's wrath upon the works of the evil one. There is no question but that "Babylon" will fail in her attempts to crush the saints (chapters 17-18). In fact, Satan himself is implicated and judged (chapter 19). As for the martyrs who asked about the avenging of their loss in chapter 5, they are given the gift of life (chapter 20). A whole new scene is presented that shows their future victory (chapters 20-21).

The woman and the dragon (Revelation 12). First, let's get the imagery. What is presented is a "sign," that is, what follows signifies something other than a literal scene. The woman is clothed "with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head" and she is pregnant (12:1-2). The dragon is a second sign. It is large, red in color, "with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads." His tail throws a third of the stars to the earth. It stands in front of the woman to devour her expectant child. But when the woman gives birth to a son destined to rule the nations, her child is snatched to God and to his throne. The woman flees to a desert place, where she is cared for 1,260 days (12:3-6).

Then, there is a note that there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, until the dragon and attending angels were cast out of heaven to the earth. At this event, great celebration broke out as salvation, the power of the kingdom of God, and the authority of Christ are acknowledged (12:7-12).

In reaction to his casting out of heaven to the earth, the dragon pursues the woman. Unable to reach her, he turns his attention to others of her children—those who hold fast to the testimony of Jesus (12:13-13:1).

The two beasts (Revelation 13). A beast rises from the sea (13:1b-10). It has ten horns and seven heads. The beast resembled a leopard, with other features like a bear and a lion. To the beast was given power by the dragon (Satan). Men followed the beast and worshiped both the dragon and the beast. The beast made war on the saints; the saints are told to be patient.

We next see a beast that comes out of the earth (13:11-18). He may have looked like a lamb, but he spoke as a dragon. The second beast functions with delegated authority from the first beast and directs the earth's inhabitants to worship the first beast. He is powerful and deceptive. He even sets up an image in honor of the first beast who, in some way, was rejuvenated after receiving a near fatal blow. The second beast had the power to force people to worship the image.

The Lamb and the faithful (Revelation 14). If in the letters to the seven churches, Christ promised victory to the faithful, here the idea is visualized. Those belonging to the kingdom of God are pictured as being with the Lamb on Mount Zion. This is not a literal standing on Zion, else Jesus would be a literal lamb. The symbolism should be obvious. Likewise, the 144,000 standing with him is not a literal number but is symbolic of those who have been redeemed and are faithful (vv. 4-5). They are the same 144,000 described in chapter 7.

In the next scene (14:6-13), three angels broadcast a message from heaven. The first proclaims the gospel to every nation, calls on people to give glory to God, and announces God's judgment upon those who refuse. The second angel declares that Babylon is fallen, as she had enticed other nations to spiritual adultery. The third angel announces judgment upon all those who had worshipped the beast and his image. Meanwhile, the saints can only endure and remain faithful to Jesus. The scene ends with a message of assurance for those who suffer martyrdom for the cause of Christ.

Attention now shifts to the One who will institute acts on heaven's behalf (14:14-20). Recalling Dan. 7:13 and identifying again the crowned Christ (Rev. 1:13), Jesus holds a sharp sickle in preparation for reaping the harvest (recalling Jesus' parable in Matt. 13:24-30). Two angels—one with a sickle and the other with fire—harvest the earth in an action that symbolizes harvesting the evil people.

The seven plagues (Revelation 15). The picture here is of seven angels who carry out heaven's final assault against those who have honored the beast. The victorious saints (cf. 6:9) are with God. They have not given in to Satan's attempt to force them to bow the knee to Roman idolatry. They hold harps and sing a song of victory. The song recalls the song directed by Moses upon Israel's physical deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 15) and aptly includes the deliverance from sin made possible by Christ. The remainder of the scene shows that the judgment upon evil issues from God, depicted as coming from his temple, engulfed with the glory of God (cf. Exod. 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11).

Now, let's revisit chapters 12-15. If you lived during the latter part of the 1st century, you would know something of the present persecution, but you would not know what was to come. Modern people have the history of Rome and therefore know that persecutions came sporadically until early in the 4th century. These persecutions were based primarily on the assumption that Christians were bad for the state. They would not participate in the Imperial Cult; they were considered atheists, because they did not call on the traditional gods. If you were superstitious and believed the worship of idols brought favor and that neglect of the idols brought natural disasters, would you not look at the Christians as subversive and the source of natural misfortune? Besides, Christians did not participate in the orgies that accompanied idolatrous worship. They did not appear as good citizens of the kingdom of this world.

The message of Revelation is that God knows those who are faithful to him. He will ultimately judge those who participate in the worldly order. He will indeed answer the prayer of the martyrs. So, does it not follow that, for the saints of the seven churches (and all others who read this book), Satan is not through with his disastrous work, but that God is sovereign and will reward the righteous?

The figures in chapter 12 appear to refer to the birth of Jesus through the people of God (the remnant of Israel). Satan is unable to take the child as God takes him to heaven. The people of God are forced into the wilderness where God protects them. However, Satan turns his attention to others who have held the testimony of Jesus.

The two beasts of chapter 13 represent Satan. Satan works through others. Here, he is working through the emperors who represent Rome and through the Imperial Cult that supports the Roman state. Hence, the source of the persecutions against the Christians is Satan; his instruments are the structure of disbelieving men.

Chapters 14 and 15 provide a view of the security of those who remain faithful. They stand with God and are not the subject of his wrath. His wrath is poured out upon those who align themselves with Satan.

Seven bowls of wrath (Revelation 16). Judgment upon Rome has already been called for in the preceding. Now, God's wrath is poured out on those who aligned themselves with the beast and who worshiped his image (see chapter 13). In the course of the pouring out of the seven bowls of wrath, all of God's creation is involved—people, the sea, the rivers, the sun, the throne of the beast and his kingdom (the symbolic barriers that kept back the onslaught), and the air. God's sovereignty is attested. His wrath falls on everything that enables life. His judgments are just, for he is just. Pagan Rome is judged.

The chapter symbolizes for the martyrs and living saints that God is aware of the evil that transpires on earth. He will, in his own good time, deal with it. The chapter is quite symbolic, and it gets the point across. Reference to the drying up of the Euphrates River "to prepare the way for the kings of the East" need not be taken as literal. The perennial enemy of Rome was Persia. By drying up the large river that traditionally marked the boundary of Persia, no obstacle stands in the way of the invading army. One should be cautious about assigning a particular country and time for an invasion from the East. The passage is symbolic of God's own acts in bringing judgment upon the wickedness represented by the Roman Empire—a kingdom of men that denies God and persecutes his saints.

Notice that as the fourth and fifth angels poured out their bowl of wrath, the followers of Satan did not repent. This brings to mind the story of the plagues of Exodus. Judgments as such do not necessarily bring repentance, as did Jonah's preaching at Nineveh.

Reference to Armageddon must also be understood in context. Topographically, there is no mountain of Megiddo. The plain near the city by that name sat on a rather insignificant tell in central Palestine. The plain near it had been the place of many battles over the period of Israel's history. Hence, the area figures into Israel history as the scene where Israel's enemies contended with Israel and her God. That this "place" is not intended to refer to the physical site for a future literal battle should be clear from other references to Zion or Jerusalem, where the attempts to conquer Israel prove to be in vain when Yahweh is truly present. In the light of Psalm 2 and Ezekiel 38-39, Satan marshals his full force for a final assault against God. But it is at "Jerusalem" that this assault takes place (cf. 14:20; 20:9).

Two cities symbolize the polarization of evil and righteousness: Rome and Jerusalem. Rome represents Satan's place of enthronement; Jerusalem represents God's place of enthronement. The principle of Psalm 2 remains valid: the total force of all the nations of the world is no match for the kingdom of God! Jerusalem may be called "Sodom and Egypt" in 11:18, but here it assumes a different role.

It is important that a symbolic name like Armageddon not be taken as a physical place. It is likewise important that the mention of the term not become the beginning of a speculative theory regarding a physical battle at the end of the world. Oh yes, the battle will be real, but the whole book is about spiritual forces and the assurance that the Lamb has overcome and that God will ultimately defeat Satan and all those who follow him.

The woman on the beast (Revelation 17). The scene changes somewhat and concentrates on Rome itself. Rome has been called Babylon the Great. Now, it is called "the great prostitute. Historical Babylon provides an apt symbol (see Habakkuk 1-2). Alongside this connection is the observation that in Daniel 2, the first of four kingdoms is that of Babylon. The fourth is Rome. The two are connected in that they both stand against God and for similar reasons. The most likely identification of this present "Babylon" is Rome, which sits on seven hills. Identification of the kings is difficult for the numbers may not be referring to specific names but to the process. Some persecution has passed, but more is to come before God settles the score. The woman is formally identified as "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."

The fall of Babylon (Revelation 18). What follows is the aftermath of the destruction of Babylon or Rome. Again, if you look to history for specific details, you will not find it, giving further evidence that the text is symbolic. The same expression, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" had been uttered earlier in Rev.14:8. The earlier reference shows the concept in prospect as announced by the angel. Here, we see details accompanying the judgment. Much is reminiscent of Lot and Sodom, where he is told to leave the city before God judges it (Genesis 19). God's saints are removed so they do not receive the judgment due to the faithless kingdom of men. Judgment is not limited to Rome itself, but extends to all people under its canopy—all who have participated in her sin. This would certainly include those places like Asia, where the Imperial Cult was strong.

The act is done (Revelation 19). Following judgment, God is praised. The judgment has demonstrated the ultimate intention for the kingdom of men to become subservient to the kingdom of God. The "wedding of the Lamb" with his bride, the faithful church, has come. The next scene is of the victor himself—Christ. The language draws from Isaiah 11, as well as Rev. 1. Christ overcomes the beast and false prophet. Blessed are those who remain faithful to the testimony!

The capture of Satan (Rev. 20:1-10). Only one enemy remains to be handled—Satan, the power behind Rome. To complete the picture, the source of the evils of Rome must also be judged. In less dramatic fashion, an angel seizes Satan (the dragon) and confines him. There is no dualism here. God can capture and punish Satan whenever he wishes. Satan yields influence and power because God allows him to do so, not because God is powerless to stop him. The entire book of Revelation presents God as sovereign and just. Man has no business asking why God allows Satan to rule; man is given the assurance that what God does is right and that he will cover his saints.

For the original readers of this work, there is assurance that God will curb Satan's activities—at least those that pertain to their situation. To them, binding him for 1,000 years is the same as saying, he will be unable to bother you indefinitely. This is not the absolute end of Satan or his power, however. But it is the promised end of him for those people who first read the letter. The 1,000 years is no more literal than the chain, the bottomless pit, or the lock and seal on the Abyss. Satan will not be able to deceive the nations in the manner he deceived Rome for a long time. But he will return to take up his evil work at a later time. The statement is brief, for the intention of heaven is not to describe the end of time, but to assure the original readers of who is in charge. In 20:4, we return to the "souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus" (6:9-11). Their prayer has been answered in promise. They live with Christ during the entire time that Satan is unable to deceive the nations as he had Rome. The 1,000 years (an indefinite period) coincide with the binding of Satan. In a word, the spiritual kingdom of which they are a part—a kingdom ruled by Christ, the victor over Satan—is the real kingdom of God; Satan's

kingdom has been crushed and Satan reigns no more. The story is about the martyrs. They may have suffered physical death for their faith, but they will not suffer condemnation. They have overcome and reign with Christ.

Turning back to the case of Satan, it is evident that what was described in vv. 1-6 is not the absolute end of Satan. Once again, he is able to deceive the nations like he had deceived those living under Rome's rule. A great figurative battle will follow. Satan is an enemy of God. He will continue his work to deceive people. Just as his previous effort with Rome had been aimed at wiping out Christ and all his saints, he will continue this pursuit. He is portrayed as preparing for an all out assault. The figures of Gog and Magog are drawn Ezekiel 38-39 (cf. Gen. 10:2), who represent a "proverbial" threat to all mankind. The massive army is portrayed as marching around "the camp of God's people, the city he loves" (20:9). But just as soon as the army takes its position, fire comes from heaven to destroy the army and Satan himself is condemned forever. What a fitting ending to Satan's work. First, the whole book addresses the cry of the martyrs and then quickly informs us that after their particular situation, other like situations will arise with the rampages of Satan. But, in God's time, which no one knows, Satan will be banished forever.

The Lamb and eternal destiny (Rev. 20:11-22:5). God, as sovereign ruler of physical and spiritual realms, exercises that sovereignty in both judgment and redemption.

At first, John sees God on his throne. In the throne room, there is no place for the physical universe. Those humans who have died now appear before God in judgment. Those whose names appear in the "book of life" remain with God; those whose names do not appear there are cast out of his presence.

A "new Jerusalem" is pictured as having replaced the old created order. This is not a rejuvenated earth; neither is it a new world order on the old earth. The "first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (21:1). In contrast of quality, the new heaven and the new earth stand in the place of the one where Satan inspired men to do evil. Ultimately, the kingdom of heaven replaces the kingdoms of men.

What follows is not so much a description of heaven as it is a picture of the bride of Christ (21:2, 9-10). The bride is new Jerusalem, a fitting description in the light of Old Testament history and teaching (see Isa. 52:1-2; 62; 65:17-28). John sees the city, as "coming down." This coming down shows the saints to be victorious; they are with God; they are under his care and coverage. The promise of wiping away the tears, death, crying, and pain is symbolic; it indicates that the hardships brought by persecution for the testimony of Jesus are over. The saints are with God, where death, night, and the dreaded sea are no more. By way of contrast, unbelieving and immoral persons will be banished to hell—the second death (21:7-8).

New Jerusalem, *i.e.,* the bride of Christ, is described in its splendor. The apostles of the Lamb are associated with the foundation, indicating the connection between the people of God and the work of Christ and his authorized representatives. The new city may have characteristics of the physical city, like walls and gates, but they have different functions. One would find the temple in the old city, where God's presence was felt, but not so in the new city, for here God himself may be found in all his glory. What is before us is an idealized city where God abides with his people. If you wish to call it heaven, so be it. But do not miss the identification and the meaning here. The intent is not to show Christians a glimpse of what heaven will be like. The intent is to declare to the martyrs and other faithful saints the culmination of God's promises and the consummation of the kingdom of God.

Conclusion (Rev. 22:6-21). Now that the drama has ended, one thing remains: to impress on the readers the urgency to take note of the certainties revealed within the book. Returning to epistolary form, John adds the ethical concerns that must be a part of faithfulness.

The certainty of the matters revealed are emphasized by the angel who spoke to John. They are the words of God himself. And, he says again, what is revealed is "to show his servants the things that must soon take place (22:6). Upon the heels of this statement is another, "Behold, I am coming soon!" Although Jesus may be implied as the one coming, the words are God's. But the words of God and Christ are in

unison. Casual readers will conclude that he is speaking of the end of the world. But in apocalyptic, the "coming of the Lord" is usually a statement of judgment.

Conclusion

We have come to the end of our study. But it should just be the beginning of a life-time of exploration. One will never exhaust the study of Bible. New insights are found in each venture into the text.

Our overall objective has been to uncover the meaning of select biblical books, using exegetical and hermeneutical principles. We have employed five methods in our attempt to accomplish this feat. One, we set out some parameters and offered brief commentary to guide the process. Two, we interjected some suggestions on how to focus on the central message and avoid pitfalls and distractions. Three, we used a multiple-choice examination to determine how well you comprehended the exegetical method. Four, you were asked to write an exegesis on a passage to demonstrate you could perform solid exegesis. And fifth, we suggested that application is required if the exegesis is to have benefit.

Hopefully, your further study of Revelation will lead into a deeper appreciation of God and his work among us. We are locked into a spiritual battle that Westerners often fail to recognize. But even those whose culture is not saturated with secular ideologies often confuse the spiritual conflict with animistic tendencies. We all need to consider the dynamics of life as we know it, and life as informed by Scripture. There shall be no excuse in the end. Ignorance is not an adequate defense when one stands before God.

Faith is built on the knowledge that God sent his Son, Christ, to atone for human sins. But faith cannot be defined in terms of the acceptance of the knowledge itself, but in a relationship of trust in God. That faith sustains the Christian in terms of trial and discouragement. Even further, a claim to faith demands appropriate conduct and attitude of mind.

If the core of The Apocalypse demonstrates that God will ultimately settle the score with Satan, the letters to the seven churches refine the meaning of faith. These letters teach us that defending the faith is essential, but if it is unaccompanied with a heart of love, it is of no personal spiritual benefit. Patience and kindness may be the result of the Spirit's working in one's life, but these virtues must not be confused with tolerance for evil.

Take time to reflect on what you have learned. For starters, The Apocalypse reveals that not all that meets the eye here on earth is not all that actually exists. The human view is limited. Secondly, The Apocalypse reveals that sovereign God sent Jesus Christ into the world to provide human redemption. By the same Christ, God has ordained the victory of righteousness over evil and the final defeat of Satan. Men and women will be judged in keeping with their faith or faithfulness.

What other conclusions can be safely drawn from the text that could encourage you in your spiritual walk with God? What implications are there for faith and faithfulness? How would you define faith and faithfulness? From the letters to the seven churches, what insights can be drawn about the role of love and ethical behavior? What principles can be drawn that may be at work in the contemporary world? How do these implications affect your life?

The focus of one's reflection should be on the meaning of The Apocalypse for believers. Consider a number of circumstances that might tempt you to compromise your faith. Those who reside in the Western world may find that Satan works through affluence, secularism, and political freedom to distract us. Those living in places where the Christian faith appears to be a threat to accepted social, religious, or political order might have a totally different set of challenges. The tendency to be overcome by the non-Christian order can be devastating, whether it leads to a loss of an initial love for Christ (as at Ephesus), compromise with immorality (as at Smyrna), or a loss of spirituality (as at Sardis). Consider your own circumstances and examine your faith against those circumstances.

We now leave the future in your hands. We can only encourage you to take your studies seriously. Weight possible interpretations carefully. Just because a person of renown offers an opinion does not make it so any more than truth spoken by an enemy makes it false. With each of the books studied, there are interpreters who will overemphasize certain aspects of the text and minimize others. Use the tools others have given and consider their comments. In the end, you will advance your own understanding and, simultaneously, ask of them their evidence for their conclusions.

Exegesis

Select from any book of the New Testament a passage of approximately ten verses for your work. Draw out the meaning of the passage in keeping with principles of interpretation. Take into account context, language, genre, theme, and purpose. Incorporate at least ten sources from online collections or printed works that relate to your passage.

You may "suggest" an interpretation when the passage is unclear, but do not offer your speculation as a proven interpretation. Your task is simply to bring out the obvious meaning of the text. When you run into a difficult situation, describe it, but do not feel you must provide a definitive interpretation. You are to "exegete" or "draw out" the meaning in so far as the text justifies. The first rule is not to place on the text a meaning that the passage itself (or other passages in the NT) will not support. The second rule is not to hide meaning that is inherent within the text just because you do not like what the text implies.

Sample Exegesis

Mark 4:1-34

Introduction

The teachings of Jesus often assumed parabolic form. Whether speaking openly to crowds or privately to disciples, Jesus did more than disseminate information. His words penetrated the heart of each person in his audience and forced a decision relative to spirituality. An encounter reported in Mark 4:1-34 illustrates the point.

Body

The section of text under review begins with a fresh activity—“Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him” (v. 1). The episode ends following the relating of one parable (v. 9), even though the text reveals that Jesus “taught them many things in parables” (v. 2) and relevant material fills out the pericope through verse 34.

Following the engagement with the crowd, the author relates that in more private moments, the twelve disciples in the company of a few others asked Jesus “concerning the parables” (v. 10). This smaller group appears to be the audience who were privy to Jesus’ response (vv. 11-32). Jesus’ own

words are bracketed by Mark's identification of the audience (v. 10) and a summation (vv. 33-34). In concluding the private session, Mark again notes that Jesus spoke many parables. The notation reinforces the idea that this was a common form of teaching employed by Jesus. The reason for teaching in parables was functional for both open and closed-minded hearers (vv. 9, 11-12, 33-34).

Regarding functionality, the parable is a story told to illustrate an idea or concept. By its very nature, it intends to explain. Yet, Jesus indicated that openness on the part of the hearer is prerequisite to understanding. And understanding is prerequisite to forgiveness. Consider the words of Jesus regarding the open-minded (his disciples): "'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God'" (v. 11). Then, consider his words to the closed-minded: "But for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn away [from their unbelief], and be forgiven'" (vv. 11-12). This latter group refused to acknowledge Jesus as messiah and, consequently, did not consider seriously his teaching regarding the kingdom of God. But there is one other matter that relates to the disciples. That is, they were not yet able to comprehend completely Jesus' teaching regarding the kingdom of God (v. 33), even though Jesus explained to them his parables.

From the author's own words, it can be assumed that in this episode Mark selected a few parables to illustrate Jesus' teaching regarding the kingdom. It is noteworthy that Mark had already introduced the thought that Jesus taught in parables (3:23) and that he did so on later occasions (12:1, 12; 13:28). And this was not the only occasion in which Jesus' disciples questioned him about the meaning of his parables (7:17).

As to the present pericope, one parable is spoken to the crowd and two are crafted for his disciples. The parables have been named by modern readers as the parable of the sower (4:3-8), the parable of the growing seed (4:26-29), and the parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32). Assigned titles may be useful identifiers, but they can be misleading when it comes to interpretation. It should be observed that the last two parables are sandwiched between an explanation of the parable of the sower (4:13-20) and an invitation to understand (4:21-25).

The parable of the sower (4:3-8) takes its name from the opening—"a sower went out to sow." But is the parable about a farmer? To answer this question, one should ask, What is it about the story

surrounding the farmer that relates to the kingdom of God? In context, the kingdom of God is the subject of conversation (4:11) and should be considered in exegesis and application. Briefly, the story relates how the seed thrown by the sower lands in both fertile and infertile places. Sprouting and development of the seed is conditioned by the soil onto which it falls.

Perhaps there are two major elements to consider in interpretation. One, the "seed" stands for the word or teaching of Jesus. This says much about the identity and person of Jesus, for he speaks with authority because he is the Son of God—a matter than some in the crowd evidently denied. Mark has already alerted his readers that his composition is "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1). The second element is this. When humans hear the teaching of Jesus, they are subject to various attractions. They may yield to temptation, succumb to persecution, give in to the cares of the world, or commit themselves to the word of Christ. The results will be either sterility or fruitfulness.

It may be beneficial to observe that neither the parable nor its explanation makes any statement about divine discrimination relative to the hearers. Each person is responsible for his/her personal response. Only Satan is mentioned as a possible "intruder" in the rejection. Satan's role is consistent with his character and work. It is Satan who tempts man, not God. The teaching of Christ and his invitation to faith goes out to the crowd. Rejection of that invitation disables one from turning and being forgiven.

The illustration of the lamp (4:21-22) points to the possibility of understanding. And if one moves on that understanding, there will be great benefit. While Matthew may have used Jesus' words about a lamp in another context (Matt. 5:15-16), Mark captures the essence and reports it in a different manner here. Whether Jesus used the lamp illustration on two occasions or Mark felt at liberty to use Jesus' words in another context is unknown. It is better to treat the saying as authentic in both instances than to spin a theory that is only conjecture. It is the pertinence of the illustration that is important here. If that is missed, then the intent of exegesis and the power of application will be missed as well.

The parable of the growing seed (4:26-30) illustrates how the growth of the kingdom is somewhat of a mystery to humans. The parable of the mustard seed (4:30-32) is similar but illustrates the extended growth of the kingdom. Sometimes, and this may be an instance, a simple point is the object of a parable. There is no justification for extending interpretation beyond what can be gleaned from the text.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mark establishes the person of Jesus as the Son of God and points to the authority by which he spoke. He selected three parables of Jesus to enlighten his readers on the nature of the kingdom of God and the general consequences of gospel proclamation.

There will always be those who reject the Good News outright, those who rush to hear and respond but fall away, and those who respond, endure, and produce the fruit of righteousness. The kingdom itself is observed through the lives of its members, but it will always remain the work of God and beyond human efforts to fully comprehend.

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Syllabus Developer

Mac Lynn, STD, San Francisco Theological Seminary
D.Admin. (honorary), The International University

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