

# **CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE**

## **THE BIBLE IN OUR CHURCHES**

### **The relevance of the Bible in the life of the Church today**

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## THE BIBLE IN OUR CHURCHES

The Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches all revere the Bible as fundamental to their Christian belief. Since the Reformation, however, the churches have had different approaches to the role of the Bible in the life of the Church. In the light of biblical scholarship the mainline churches have adopted a common approach to the understanding of the Bible.

The material in this folder is designed to assist Christians, in small interchurch groups, to discuss the role of the Bible in their churches, to pray together, and so move their churches further along the path to visible Christian unity.

Each of the three sessions in The Bible in Our Churches has an article to centre the discussion, a set of questions to help start discussion, and a set of prayer resources. These prayer resources are offered to assist the group to pray. Someone should lead the prayer. Just how the prayer resources will be used is for each group to decide.

We would encourage those who use this material to continue, to be active in promoting closer relationships among the churches.

This material has been prepared by the Christians in Dialogue task force. The Christians in Dialogue program is sponsored by the Anglican Diocese of Brisbane, the Lutheran Church of Australia Queensland District, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, and the Uniting Church in Australia Queensland Synod.

**Authority in the Church:** How our Churches Make Decisions.

**How We Worship:** The riches of the different Western worship traditions.

**The Faith We Confess:** The relevance of the Nicene Creed today.

**Feed My Lambs, Feed My Sheep:** A study of the ordained ministry.



# LEADER'S GUIDE

## 1. Gathering

People coming to a group for the first time will often have some anxiety –

- ◆ Will I know anyone?
- ◆ What will be expected of me?
- ◆ Did I switch off the oven?
- ◆ It is important to help them through this first awkward stage. Have all your preparations done well beforehand so that you are able to greet each person warmly on arrival, introducing them to one another, and perhaps having tea and coffee available.

## 2. Beginning

- A. When all have arrived get the session started by giving them a clear statement of what the group is about - Welcome the group
- ◆ who we are;
  - ◆ why we're here;
  - ◆ when we will finish.

It might go like this: "Welcome to my place, and I'm delighted that each of you has been able to make it. We are a group of people from Churches gathered together to reflect and share our ideas on ... (*name of study*). Tonight we will be looking at Study One .....

- B. Then invite the members to introduce themselves saying:
- ◆ who I am;
  - ◆ why I'm here;
  - ◆ what I hope to get out of the program.

Lead yourself by giving a short response to each of the three areas. Then invite each of the others to do likewise. Don't worry if some respond to only one or two of the areas.

- C. Then distribute copies of the program.

Encourage participants to listen to one another's ideas with respect.

## 3. Opening Devotion

- A. You may wish to play some music quietly in the background and give the group a few moments to reflect on the opening devotion. Then call for volunteers to lead it.
- B. You might like to choose an appropriate song for the group to share

## 4. Reflection on the Topic

Invite a couple of people to read the teaching. Encourage the readers to pause between each section.

## 5. Discussion

Allow a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on the questions. Encourage participants to share responses to each question but there is to be no pressure put on anyone to speak. Be sure to make some response to each speaker if only to say e.g. "Thank you John". This makes sure the participant feels that he / she has been heard.

## 6. Closure

Thank the participants for their participation. Check to ensure venue is right for next session.

## Closing Devotion

### Cuppa

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# **THE BIBLE IN OUR CHURCHES**

## **SESSION ONE - HOW WE USE THE BIBLE**

All Churches hold the Bible to be fundamental to their belief and their life. Churches use the Bible in worship, in preaching, in training their ministers, in the formulation of doctrine, in the education of their members and in personal devotion.

### **The Bible in Worship**

Readings from the Bible have always been an important part of Christian worship. One of the earliest descriptions of Christians at worship, from the second century, says “on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place and the memoirs of the apostles, or the writings of the prophets, are read as long as time permits.” These memoirs are what we call the New Testament, and the writings of the prophets is a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures which we call the Old Testament. One of the most important contributions of the Reformation to Christianity was the renewed recognition of the role of the readings from the Bible which had always been an essential part of Christian worship.

Today most congregations in the Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches use more or less the same Bible readings at their Sunday worship. Some read directly from a copy of the Bible, while others read from a book called a lectionary in which the Bible readings for each Sunday of the year are arranged in order. In the Uniting Church the sermon, which is based on the Bible readings, usually forms the centre of the worship, although in many congregations word and sacrament hold equal place. In the Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches the readings from the Bible, the sermon or homily, and the celebration of the eucharist are combined in the one worship service.

In recent times churches have revised their worship services to ensure that people hear a wide selection of Bible readings on Sundays. The churches have adopted a three—year cycle of readings characterised by the semi—continuous reading from one of the gospels each year. As well as the readings from the gospels there are selections from the Old Testament books, and from the psalms, and semi—continuous readings from the New Testament.

Since the meetings of the Roman Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the Roman Catholic Church has put much greater emphasis on the Bible readings which make up the Liturgy of the Word in the Mass. To symbolise this new emphasis, in many Roman Catholic churches the lectionary is carried in procession into the church at the beginning of Mass and, after the readings, the lectionary is held high so that it can be seen by all in the congregation.

Beside the readings, most of the words used in worship services in our churches are taken from the Bible and most of the prayers are biblical. The words of institution spoken over the bread and wine are a compilation the words of Jesus at the last supper.

In Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting churches hymns have always played a large part in worship and many of these are biblically based. Indeed, the churches rely on the Bible for most of the imagery used in their worship.

### **Preaching the Bible**

Preaching based on Bible readings is now an important part of the worship service in each of our churches. The Reformers of the 16th century were quick to use the sermon as the way of making people familiar with the Bible and its meaning. They put so much emphasis on the sermon that Bible—based preaching replaced the celebration of the eucharist as the core of

Protestant worship. For Luther, preaching was the living word of God in which the Bible came alive and for him “the chief worship of God is preaching the gospel.’ Since the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church has encouraged its ministers to base their preaching on the Bible readings and to draw out the relevance of the readings for Christians today.

The study of Scripture has always been an important part of the training given candidates for the ministry in the churches of the Reformation, and since the Second Vatican Council the study of Scripture has become even more important in Roman Catholic seminaries. The Vatican Council said: “Students for the priesthood should receive a most careful training in holy Scripture, which should be the soul of all theology.”

The way in which the Bible is to be understood has been a contentious matter among Christians. Our four churches, however, use the work of the modern biblical scholars and to that extent we now share a common approach to the study of Scripture. Some other churches are suspicious of modern biblical scholarship.

Students for the ministry in the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches are now trained together in the Brisbane College of Theology. They are taught courses in Scripture by lecturers from across the churches. The Lutheran Church continues to send its candidates for the ministry to Luther Campus in Adelaide where they are educated in the art and science of biblical interpretation. Students from all our churches study Hebrew and Greek so that they will be able to read the Bible in the languages in which the early church received the Scriptures.

### **Growing Interest in Bible Study**

Whereas the Bible in past times was the cause of major dispute among the churches, it is now a force in bringing people from the different churches together. Each of our churches encourages a personal and family devotional life which is biblically based, and we make use of biblical devotional material from one another’s churches. It is common practice for church stores to stock material published by other churches.

Once, only those who were studying for the ministry were expected to study the Bible in any depth, but today people in the pews are encouraged to attend Scripture study courses and often people from one church will attend courses arranged by another church. Many others, beside those studying for the ministry, attend courses at the ecumenical Brisbane College of Theology. Indeed, lay people outnumber clerical students in some of the courses at the college. A similar trend is evident at Luther Campus.

### **The Bible in Schools**

The curriculum used by the representatives of the churches in co-operative Religious Education in the State schools is biblically based, as is the Religious Education in church schools. Clergy and lay people from the Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches who work together in providing Religious Education in State schools usually interpret Scripture in much the same way. Regrettably, some pastors from other churches who visit State schools and who are expected to work co-operatively with people from our churches, interpret the Bible in a different way. This has been the source of tension in the past. We will address this problem of interpretation of the Bible in a later session.

### **Bible Study Groups**

Bible study groups have always been a feature of congregational life in Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Churches. In more recent times they have been introduced into Roman Catholic parishes. In some parishes a group will gather during the week to reflect, prayerfully, on the

Bible readings for the following Sunday. In some areas the ministers' fraternal do this as an aid in preparing their sermons. Some of the material that churches publish to facilitate Bible study groups is now being used across the churches. The indications are that, before long, interchurch Bible study among the mainline churches will become more common at the local level. This should reduce misunderstandings among churches.

### **Variety of Translations**

People are often confused by the growing number of different translations of the Bible that are available today. Older people will recall that until the middle of this century the King James Bible was the only translation used by the Anglican, Lutheran and Uniting Churches. Roman Catholics used a different translation.

In Bible study groups difficulties can arise when the participants bring different translations of the Bible, although there could be value in comparing the different translations. In most Uniting churches and some Anglican churches, a copy of the same translation of the Bible is provided for all worshippers and the readings are from that translation. In the Roman Catholic churches the readings are contained in a lectionary and are all from the Jerusalem Bible translation. In 1993 the Roman Catholic bishops approved the new Revised Standard Version for use in the lectionary. 'The Lutheran lectionary contains what is called the preferred version for each Bible passage. So at a Lutheran service readings could be taken from several different translations of the Bible. We will say more about the increasing number of translations of the Bible in a later session.

### **Biblical Scholarship**

The growing interest in the Bible by people in the pews, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, is to a large extent the result of the growth in scriptural scholarship. Until the time of Pope Pius XII the authorities in the Roman Catholic Church had a very conservative attitude towards the study of Scripture. Pope Pius XII, in the 1940's, changed that policy and encouraged Roman Catholic Scripture scholars to join in the research that was being done by Scripture scholars in other churches.

This enlivened participation by Roman Catholic scholars in the last fifty years has been a stimulus to scriptural research across the churches. Scholars have written on a variety of biblical topics in scholarly journals and also for the general reader. Church publishers are busy producing a constant flow of new books on biblical topics.

### **Church Teachings and the Bible**

Our churches have recourse to the Bible when there is a need to formulate teaching on a particular matter. This has always been the case for the churches of the Reformation. A current example is the Australian Lutheran Church's discussion on the role of women in ministry. Their theologians prepared a paper which is essentially a commentary on the relevant passages from the Bible. They insist that if there are to be any changes in the Lutheran Church's teaching on this matter they must be based on the Bible. At the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church made it clear that its doctrines must spring from Scripture, and current problems must be examined in the light of Scripture. The Roman Catholic Church's more recent teachings concerning revelation, the way God speaks to us, and concerning the nature of the Church, are examples of teachings firmly based on the Bible.

The Reformation controversy concerning the relationship between Scripture and tradition has, more or less, been resolved. Biblical scholarship has enabled all our churches to better understand, and agree on, what Scripture is saying on important matters of faith. And all our churches are agreed that tradition, the role played by the faith community under the

inspiration of the Holy Spirit from the beginning of the Christian Church to the present day, is essential in the formulation of Church teaching.

Modern biblical studies have highlighted the role played by tradition in the formation of the Bible itself. It was the faith life of the early Christian community that caused them to retell the traditions about Jesus, to write them so that they would be preserved, and finally to select those that, together with the Old Testament, would become the Bible.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. In what ways does your church show respect for the Bible? What changes in your life time have you seen in the way the Bible and Bible readings have been used in your church? How important is it for you that the sermon on Sundays be related to the Bible readings?
2. Who reads from the Bible or lectionary at the Sunday service in your church? How are the readers trained? What are some ways of improving the way in which the Bible is read and heard in your church?
3. Give some examples of how your life has been influenced by the Bible.
4. Suggest ways in which people from different churches in your area could come together to know the Bible better.

## **RESOURCES FOR PRAYER**

### **Old Testament Reading: Genesis 11:1-9.**

At first, the people of the whole world had only one language and used the same words. As they wandered about in the East, they came to a plain in Babylonia and settled there. They said to one another, "Come on! Let's make bricks and bake them hard." So they had bricks to build with and tar to hold them together. They said, "Now let's build a city with a tower that reaches the sky, so that we can make a name for ourselves and not be scattered all over the earth."

Then the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which those men had built, and he said, "Now then, these are all one people and they speak one language; this is just the beginning of what they are going to do. Soon they will be able to do anything they want! Let us go down and mix up their language so that they will not understand each other.' So the Lord scattered them all over the earth, and they stopped building the city. The city was called Babylon, because there the Lord mixed up the language of all the people, and from there he scattered them all over the earth.(GNB)

### **New Testament Reading: Acts 2:1-11**

When the day of Pentecost came, all the believers were gathered in one place. Suddenly there was a noise from the sky which sounded like a strong wind blowing, and it filled the whole

house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire which spread out and touched each person there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak.

There were Jews living in Jerusalem, religious men who had come from every country in the world. When they heard this noise, a large crowd gathered. They were all excited, because each of them heard the believers talking in his own language. In amazement and wonder they exclaimed, "These people who are talking like this are Galileans! How is it, then, that all of us hear them speaking in our own native languages? We are from Parthia, Media, and Elam; from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia; from Pontus and Asia, from Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Egypt and the regions of Libya near Cyrene. Some of us are from Rome, both Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism, and some of us are from Crete and Arabia - yet all of us hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things that God has done!"(GNB)

### **Reflection on the Readings**

All around us we see the confusion that sin brings: whole people are scattered by warfare, famine and natural calamities; groups, communities, and families are divided by quarrels and conflict. In Genesis, one human language symbolically becomes many through the sin of pride. The mystery of Pentecost is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, bringing a new unity of understanding among peoples. Despite this Christians still become tainted by the spirit of Babel. The Spirit of Pentecost, however, is at work in the ecumenical movement. Now a desire for fuller communion extends through the churches, opening new paths of reconciliation and reviving our hope.

### **Prayer for Unity**

God of love, hear the prayer of Christians joined in dialogue, and gather to yourself all your scattered children. May your Holy Spirit teach us again the language of the Gospel, the language of pardon and mercy, of compassion and love.

May we play our part in building up the household of God. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Affirmation of Faith: The Nicene Creed (Agreed Version)**

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

# **THE BIBLE IN OUR CHURCHES**

## **SESSION TWO - WHERE DOES THE BIBLE COME FROM?**

Many people think the Bible is a single book. In fact the Bible is a collection of material written by different people, at different times and places, over a period of more than a thousand years. The Bible is more like a small library than a single book. The story of how we got the Bible that we read today is a very long story indeed.

### **Ancient Traditions**

Much of what is in the Bible had its origins in oral traditions, in the telling of stories about past events from memory. Some of the old Testament material goes back to the time before recorded history. For example, we will never know the origin of the story of Noah's Ark many details of which are found in similar stories of the ancient Near East. The story about Noah, and those about the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, must have been in circulation for centuries before they were recorded. The nomadic Hebrew tribes would have told and retold them, most likely in a set form so that they would be more easily remembered both by the tellers and by those who heard the stories.

Although none of the original manuscripts exist today they were copied before they perished. Throughout the centuries the manuscripts were copied continuously. Until the invention of printing, five centuries ago, all this copying had to be done laboriously by hand, one copy at a time. The oldest complete copy of the Old Testament that has survived dates only from the tenth century A.D.

### **Modern Discoveries**

In the second half of the last century a store-room containing ancient manuscripts was found at a synagogue in Old Cairo. As well as other material, portions of the Old Testament, from a period further back in history than manuscripts previously available to Bible scholars, were found there. A better known collection of ancient manuscripts is the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in isolated Palestinian caves in the 1940s. Included in the discoveries there were scrolls from the Old Testament a thousand years earlier than previously known manuscripts. Scholars are now able to compare material from later times with these scrolls and correct mistakes that scribes and printers have made over the centuries. What has been found, however, is a close agreement among all the manuscripts. It shows the care with which scribes painstakingly copied manuscripts, and gives us confidence that what we have in our Bibles today is an accurate reflection of what was originally written.

### **The Old Testament**

The first Christians considered the Hebrew Scriptures to be the inspired word of God and included them as a part of their own Scriptures. It is not clear to us why the rabbis at that time recognised some of their ancient books as sacred and not others. One theory holds that all the books that survived the national catastrophe of the exile were considered by the Hebrews to be inspired by God. This would account for the two collections of books which the Hebrews called the Law and the Prophets. But what about the other more recent books which the Hebrews considered sacred also? The Hebrews called these books the Writings. Why the rabbis included some books in this collection and rejected others is not clear to us.

During the last few centuries before the time of Christ the Hebrew Scriptures were translated from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek for the benefit of the many Jewish communities who, by that time, were living outside Palestine and who no longer spoke the same language as the people living in Palestine. At this time Greek had become the language of commerce and

culture for the people living around the Mediterranean and beyond. It was this Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that most of the first Christians were familiar with. Not until the end of the first century A.D. did the Jewish rabbis finally decide which books would be included in their official Scriptures. Some parts of the Greek translation, which had been in circulation for several hundred years by then, were not included in their definitive collection. One theory is that since Judaism was by then threatened by Christianity the rabbis rejected any book in the Christian Greek Old Testament which, as far as they could see at the time, had not originally been written in Hebrew. The Christians, however, continued to include all the books of the Greek translation in their Old Testament.

At the time of the Reformation divergent attitudes towards these extra books resulted in their not being included in Protestant Bibles. So today, in the Old Testament section of Roman Catholic Bibles, there are seven more books than there are in Protestant Bibles, as well as additional parts of two other books. It is the question of these books which still prevents all Christians having a common Bible.

### **Paul's Letters and the Gospels**

To the Hebrew Scriptures the first Christians added writings that told - the story of Jesus and recorded the preaching, teaching and life of their communities. Paul's letters are the earliest Christian writings to come down to us. Jesus, like the rabbis of his time, taught by word of mouth and did not leave written records. Paul's first letter was written to the Christian community at Thessalonica about the year 50 A.D. In the New Testament Paul's letters are arranged according to their length, not in the order in which they were written. His letters contain almost no information about the life of Jesus apart from comments about Jesus' death and resurrection. We find the earliest account of the resurrection in Paul's first letter to the Christian community at Corinth.

Accounts of Jesus' life and his teachings circulated by word of mouth before they were recorded in writing. It was when the first generation of Christians, some of whom had been eyewitnesses to his life, began to die that their recollections were written down. The oldest of the Gospels is probably Mark's which was written for the Christian community in Rome. Some time later Matthew's Gospel was written for the Christians in Syria and Luke's for a group of gentle Christians. John's Gospel, written for the Christian community in Ephesus, was later still. None of these Gospels were simple biographies of Jesus, they were rather records of the Gospel preached by the apostles.

Although all the original manuscripts of the material which became the New Testament have been lost, copies were made so that by the end of the first century copies of the letters of Paul and of the Gospels were beginning to circulate among the different Christian communities spread over Asia Minor, Greece and Italy. We know from a letter written about 96 A.D. by Clement that the Christians in Rome had, by that date, a copy of a letter which Paul had written to the Christians at Corinth. Eventually two collections of writings were circulating, one of the letters of Paul and another of the four Gospels. These two collections were considered by the early Church to be inspired by God, which is why they were so fiercely protected in time of persecution. When the Acts of the Apostles, which Luke wrote as a sequel to his Gospel, was added to the revered books it was logical to put the two collections together into one. The Acts of the Apostles links the two collections since it recounts the source and authority of Paul's mission. The early Christians also recognised the letters of other apostles and associates of the apostles, as well as the Book of Revelation, as being inspired by God. Other writings circulating in the early Church were not so recognised.

## **The New Testament**

The teaching of unorthodox Christians forced the Church to decide which books could be appealed to as undoubtedly inspired by God. Some heretics wanted to reject some writings already much revered by the majority of Christians, and others wanted to add their special writings to the list of revered books.

About 140 A.D. a teacher from Asia Minor named Marcion came to Rome and introduced a novel teaching. He wanted to reject the Old Testament, and those Christian writings which in any way showed a dependence on the Old Testament. His reason for doing this was that he did not believe the God of the Old Testament was the same God who was the father of Jesus. Marcion's followers formed an influential group for a considerable time and looked like attracting many other Christians to their way of thinking. In the face of this threat the church leaders saw the necessity of defining the books to be included in the New Testament more explicitly than had been the case until then. It took time, however, for the scattered Christian communities to agree about the books that we have in our New Testament today. The first list of the 27 books of the New Testament, as we know it, is found in a letter written by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, in 367 A.D.

## **The Bible in English**

John Wycliffe, William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale are the ones credited with making the Bible available in the English language. The translation made by Wycliffe and his supporters, like all translations into national languages before the Reformation, was from Jerome's Latin Bible of 390. Despite the opposition of most of the English bishops who forced him to move to the continent, Tyndale made his translation from the original Hebrew and Greek. In 1535 Coverdale, basing his work on what Wycliffe and Tyndale had already achieved, produced the first complete Bible to be printed in English.

King James 1, in 1604, commissioned a team, made up of the best scholars in England, to produce a new translation of the Bible which was made directly from the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts then available. The King James Bible was published in 1611. Over the centuries since then the language of the King James Bible has been much admired by readers, and it has had an important influence on English literature. Up until the middle of this century the King James Bible was the version of the Bible best known to Anglicans, Lutherans and Uniting Church people.

English Roman Catholics in exile on the continent published an English translation from the Jerome Latin Bible in 1609. A revision of this Bible was made in 1763 by Richard Challoner, the assistant Roman Catholic bishop of London. For 200 years the Challoner Bible was almost universally used among English speaking Roman Catholics.

Some Christians today still think that the King James Bible is the closest version we have to the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. They consider it blasphemy to change it or to point out the inadequacy of its scholarship. Modern translations, however, are much more reliable. Today's scholars have available many biblical manuscripts more ancient than those which were available to the translators of the King James Bible in 1611.

The King James Bible has been revised a number of times to modernise its language and to take account of the developments of biblical studies. The 1952 revision, titled the Revised Standard Version, is currently the most widely used of all the English language Bibles. It retains the characteristic style and dignity of previous revisions while going much further in trying to give meaning to obscure parts of the text.

The most recent revision, published in 1990 with the title New Revised Standard Version, addressed the matter of inclusive language, and has finally changed the pronouns such as thee and thou.

In 1966 the Roman Catholic bishops of England gave permission for a Roman Catholic edition of the Revised Standard Version. As in all Roman Catholic Bibles, the Old Testament books which are still a matter of dispute, are printed in the sequence in which they appeared in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. And some changes were made in the text of the New Testament. For example the word brother was replaced by the word brethren when reference was made in the Gospels to the brothers of Jesus. This change was made in order to favour the Roman Catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of the mother of Jesus.

### **Translations from Hebrew and Greek**

There are three major modern Protestant translations of the Bible in English which have been made directly from the original languages and are not based on the King James Bible or its revisions. The New English Bible, published in 1970, was sponsored by the Church of England and all the main Protestant Churches in England. The Good News Bible, published in 1979, was sponsored by the American Bible Society. Both these translations use contemporary English. The New International Version, published in 1978, was commissioned by the National Association of Evangelicals and the Christian Reformed Church in the United States. This translation made by a large number of Protestant scholars has been described as conservative. It adopts a more formal style and avoids the colloquialisms of the Good News Bible.

Two modern Roman Catholic translations made directly from the Hebrew and Greek are the Jerusalem Bible, first published in 1966, and the New American Bible, first published in 1971. The tendency in recent years is for Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars to collaborate in the work of translation. Roman Catholic scholars have collaborated on the second edition of the New English Bible, and Protestant scholars have collaborated on the second edition of the New American Bible.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How helpful is it to know what sort of people wrote the books of the Bible, and to know the circumstances in which the books were written? Does one or another kind of biblical literature have more appeal for you personally?
2. What difference does it make that some churches have more books in the Old Testament section of their Bible than other churches? What are the names of these additional books? Which incidents have you heard about from these books?
3. Why are there so many English translations of the Bible? Which ones are you familiar with? What advantages are there in owning more than one version of the Bible? Are there any disadvantages?

4. How important is the Old Testament in the life of your Church and in your own Christian life? Compare your own knowledge of the Old Testament with your knowledge of the New Testament. How would you explain the connection between the two Testaments?

## **RESOURCES for PRAYER**

### **Old Testament Reading: Deuteronomy 6: 4 – 12**

“Israel, remember this! The Lord — and the Lord alone — is our God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Never forget these commands that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working. Tie them on your arms and wear them on your foreheads as a reminder. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.

Just as the Lord your God promised your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he will give you a land with large and prosperous cities which you did not build. The houses will be full of good things which you did not put in them, and there will be wells that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant. When the Lord brings you into this land and you have all you want to eat, make certain that you do not forget the Lord who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves.(GNB)

### **New Testament Reading: Luke 2: 41-52**

Every year the parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When Jesus was twelve years old, they went to the festival as usual. When the festival was over, they started back home, but the boy Jesus stayed in Jerusalem. His parents did not know this; they thought that he was with the group, so they travelled a whole day and then started looking for him among their relatives and friends. They did not find him so they went back to Jerusalem looking for him. On the third day they found him in the Temple, sitting with the Jewish teachers, listening to them and asking questions. All who heard him were amazed at his intelligent answers. His parents were astonished when they saw him, and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been terribly worried trying to find you.”

He answered them, “Why did you have to look for me? Didn’t you know that I had to be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand his answer.

So Jesus went back with them to Nazareth, where he was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. Jesus grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining favour with God and men.(GNB)

### **Reflection on the Readings**

The Church is a spiritual home where people in all their diversity can find a place and exercise a ministry. Within it they can serve one another in mutual love and joyfully worship God.

The Church has always seen the family as being ordained by God to be a means of expressing love and unity. Yet through human failure the home can also be a place of unhappiness and strife. In a time of secularism, Christians know that God is at the centre of family life and that they are called to let Christ's teaching permeate their homes. We pray for the healing of broken relationships in Church and home. Healing can happen, as is shown by those who married across denominational divides - those interchurch couples and their children who are already trying to live out the unity for which Christ prayed.

### **Prayer for Unity**

Father in heaven, source of all love and all joy, you have ordained both the Church and the home to be centres of peace, mutual service and enrichment. We confess to you our sins of selfishness and lack of humility, which have caused painful separations. Help us truly to acknowledge you to be at the heart of Church and home, and heal our wounds for the sake of your Son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

### **Affirmation of Faith: The Apostles Creed**

We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.  
Amen.

# **THE BIBLE IN OUR CHURCHES**

## **SESSION THREE - HOW WE UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE**

For the modern reader the Bible can be a strange book difficult to understand. The Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches recognise that the work done by biblical scholars has contributed very significantly to our ability to understand the Bible. This century has seen rapid advances in historical, archaeological and linguistic knowledge concerning the Bible. Thanks to scholars, Christians today know that the Bible is a collection of many different kinds of literary works which were written between nineteen hundred and, three thousand years ago, and which proclaim the occurrence of certain events: in history which took place in the Middle East. The scholars have provided us with a good deal of information about the authors of the biblical material, and about the people for whom they wrote. Since some of this information was not available to previous generations we are better equipped than our forebears to understand this puzzling book.

### **Verifying the Text**

By tracing the changes that have been made in a biblical text as it has been copied over the centuries, scholars can establish the most likely wording of the original text.

Of course the more ancient the manuscripts available to the scholars the fewer mistakes in copying they have to cope with. It is clear that mistakes have been made by copyists. Sometimes the scribe has mistakenly inserted into the text notes that someone had made on the manuscript being copied. Scribes have at times made deliberate modifications in the text thinking that this would improve the text. At times material which a scribe has considered to be offensive has been omitted, and other texts have been changed to make them correspond more closely to similar material elsewhere in the Bible. Establishing the setting in which the text was written and how it was to be used helps to clarify the wording of the original text.

### **The Bible as Literature**

A basic requirement for sound biblical interpretation is an understanding of the Bible as literature. What would have been grasped spontaneously by the original readers of the biblical text can now be appreciated fully only by painstaking research into how language was used in the Ancient Middle East.

We know that the meaning of our words depends on the context in which we use them. We are familiar with the different literary forms in use today such as the novel, text book, biography, history, poetry and newspaper. We are not, however, familiar with the literary forms of the ancient Middle East. Even the most careful reader today can be confused, by the variety of literary forms used by the biblical writers.

In the Bible we find prose and poetry, short stories and epic dramas, collections of proverbs and riddles, letters to various groups, legal codes and practical advice, mythical stories about the beginning of time, and the interpretation of dreams. Only a small part of the Bible is history as we understand history. Some Christians have tended to read the Bible as if it were all history, as if the events took place as they are described in the Bible, and in the order in which they are recorded there. Some of it, however, is symbolic language which the modern reader can have difficulty understanding. We seek to know the kind of literature the author was writing in order to understand the meaning that the author wanted to convey.

## **The Formation of the Gospels**

Scholars now recognise a somewhat complicated process which lies behind the composition of each of the four Gospels. The process began with Jesus' public life in Palestine at the beginning of the first century. The second stage of the process was when the apostles preached their faith in the risen Christ. Their intention was to share their faith with their listeners. It was not to present a simple factual report of Jesus' life and death.

The final stage was when the four Gospel writers recorded their narratives for the benefit of the different communities that they addressed. These communities had different backgrounds and different spiritual needs. The Gospel writers adapted the material available to each of them to suit those different circumstances. They were theologians who were explaining the spiritual significance of the Jesus tradition. They were not primarily writing biographies of Jesus.

Understanding this process of Gospel development, allows the modern reader to concentrate attention on the message that each Gospel Writer wanted to convey, rather than worry about the incidental details of the Gospel stories.

## **Biblical Fundamentalism**

At the beginning of this century some scholars proposed startling theories concerning the Bible which tended to bring the good work of the majority of the biblical scholars into disrepute. A group of conservative Protestant Christians felt that what they called the fundamentals of the Christian faith were being threatened by these radical scholars. The conservative Christians received wide support, particularly in North America. They were concerned particularly that the meaning of creation, the virginal conception of Jesus, and Jesus' bodily resurrection not be eroded by the theories of the more radical scholars. We need to be careful not to put labels on people. The term biblical fundamentalist, while not applicable to all conservative Christians, is commonly used to describe those who, although they might be prepared to accept some of the scholarly approaches to the Bible, nevertheless reject much of the biblical scholarship which our churches recognise as valid. Their way of preserving Christian belief is to insist that everything contained in the Bible is literally true, particularly in historical and scientific matters.

Biblical fundamentalists are to be found in each of our churches. Fundamentalists cannot understand that the Bible is God's word given to us through centuries of historical and cultural conditioning. They equate the Christ of the Gospel with the historical Jesus, and they make no allowance for the way in which the stories about the historical Jesus were interpreted by the Gospel writers. While a fundamentalist position dominates in some churches, in the Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches biblical scholarship is much respected.

## **Inspiration**

All Christians believe that the Bible has been inspired by God in a way in which no other writings have been. Inspiration is a way of speaking about the uniquely sacred character of the Bible. Biblical fundamentalists mean something different from other Christians when they say that the Bible was inspired by God. Fundamentalists believe that God is the only author of the biblical material, that God directly inspired the human writers with the words so that they were merely recorders. For them there is no possibility of any kind of error in the Bible, and it is offensive to probe behind the words of the Bible.

Other Christians see inspiration as the impulse given by God to the authors to write the truths that he wanted us to know for our salvation. He left to the human authors, however, the decisions about how these truths were to be expressed, what material they would use, and how they would formulate and arrange their material. Throughout the process God was active as the ongoing cause of their work.

Many biblical fundamentalists will not use modern translations of the Bible. Most of them are convinced that the King James Bible of 1611 is the most reliable translation and it is from that version that they will always quote.

### **The Role of the Church**

At the time of the Reformation the manner of biblical interpretation became a matter of dispute. The Reformers challenged the binding nature of the interpretations given by the Pope and bishops concerning certain doctrines. They maintained that the Bible should be allowed to speak for itself. They did not, however, advocate a naive interpretation of the Bible as modern biblical fundamentalists do. Martin Luther was himself a biblical scholar and the other Reformers were all versed in the scholarship of their day. The main Protestant churches have always encouraged biblical scholarship and Protestant scholars have been the leaders of the modern biblical movement. The Roman Catholic Church didn't accept the principles of modern biblical research until the 1940s, but since then her scholars have been at the forefront of the research too.

Despite much biblical research being done on an ecumenical basis today, our churches still differ on their approach to the Bible. They each assess differently the respective authority of the Bible, the ancient creeds, their confessional and official teaching statements, and the common mind of the Church. So although we read the same Bible, our churches have arrived at different conclusions concerning some doctrines.

### **Ecumenical Scholarship**

There are some significant examples of biblical scholars from different churches working ecumenically to assist the churches overcome these differences in doctrine. In Europe and in the United States, the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches have been in dialogue since the 1960s on matters which have divided the two churches. The issue which was at the centre of the Reformation, justification by faith alone, is now much better understood because of the research of scholars from the two traditions. The churches now have insights into what the Bible is saying about this matter which were not available at the time of the Reformation.

Biblical scholars from these two churches are now working with the assistance of scholars from other churches, to resolve the problem of the role of the papacy. While Roman Catholics see the papacy as God given and therefore essential to the nature of the Church, Lutherans see it as a human institution which is not absolutely necessary. The scholars have done a great deal of research into the role of Peter in the New Testament church. From this research we now have insights which were not available to previous generations. So it could well be that this fresh ecumenical interpretation of the biblical material concerning the role of Peter will help the two churches, and eventually all our churches, overcome the problems raised by the papacy which presently divides Roman Catholics from other Christians.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Share with the group your personal experience of the Bible, and your learning about it. Some may have been introduced to it in childhood and others later in life. Try to imagine people in Russia reading the Bible for the first time in their lives. What difficulties would they counter?
2. Explain why, you think that the Bible should or should not be expected to have specific answers to modern day questions. Try to give examples.
3. Many Christians tend to take the Bible at its face value, ‘what it says is what it means’. For example, when they read about Jesus walking on the water they think that is exactly what the writer means. Other Christians reflect on the possibility of another, more spiritual meaning, behind the story. How do you usually read the Bible?
4. In your church tradition who speaks with authority in interpreting what the Bible says about important issues? For example, on the question of church leadership, how does your church interpret Matthew 16: 18—19?

## RESOURCES FOR PRAYER

### Old Testament Reading: Ruth 1: 1—9, 14—16

Long ago, in the days before Israel had a king, there was a famine in the land. So a man named Elimelech, who belonged to the clan of Ephrath and who lived in Bethlehem in Judah, went with his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion to live for a while in the country of Moab. While they were living there, Elimelech died, and Naomi was left alone with her two sons, who married Moabite girls, Orpah and Ruth. About ten years later Mahlon and Chilion also died, and Naomi was left all alone, without husband or sons.

Some time later Naomi heard that the Lord had blessed his people by giving them good crops; so she got ready to leave Moab with her daughters-in-law. They started out together to go back to Judah, but on the way she said to them, “Go back home and stay with your mothers. May the Lord be as good to you as you have been to me and to those who had died. And may the Lord make it possible for each of you to marry again and have a home.”

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye and went back home, but Ruth held on to her. So Naomi said to her, “Ruth, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her God. Go back home with her.”

But Ruth answered, “Don’t ask me to leave you! Let me go with you. Wherever you go, I will go wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. (GNB)

### **New Testament Reading: Acts 15: 6-14, 19**

The apostles and the elders met together to consider (whether Gentiles must be circumcised). After a long debate Peter stood up and said, “My brothers, you know that a long time ago God chose me from among you to preach the Good News to the Gentiles, so that they could hear and believe. And God, who knows the thoughts of everyone, showed his approval of the Gentiles by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he had to us. He made no difference between us and them; he forgave their sins because they believed. So then, why do you now want to put God to the test by laying a load on the backs of the believers which neither our ancestors nor we ourselves were able to carry? No! We believe and are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are.”

The whole group was silent as they heard Barnabas and Paul report all the miracles and wonders that God had performed through them among the Gentiles. When they had finished speaking, James spoke up: “Listen to me, my brothers! Simon has just explained how God first showed his care for the Gentiles by taking from among them a people to belong to him. It is my opinion that we should not trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God”. (GNB)

### **Reflections on the Readings**

When God chose a people for himself he did it for the salvation of all peoples.

Ruth, the Moabite widow, insisted on accompanying Naomi to her home in Bethlehem of Judea. “Your people will be my people, your God will be my God”, was Ruth’s joyful and confident response to her mother-in-law.

The Council of Jerusalem admitted Gentiles into the Church without subjecting them to Jewish tradition. God “showed his care for the Gentiles by taking from among them a people to belong to him.”

We come together ecumenically to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to each of the churches, to look towards unity in diversity and to seek reconciliation between people and God.

### **Prayer for Unity**

O God, since in Christ there is no distinction of race or origin, in you we are all one. Empower us to break down the barriers which still divide us so that we may work in harmony with each other and with you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **New Testament Affirmation of Faith: Colossians 1:15—20**

Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is, the first-born Son, superior to all created things. For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him. Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place. He is the head of his body, the church; he is the source of the body’s life. He is the first-born Son, who was raised from death, in order, that he alone might have the first place in all things. For it was by God’s own decision that the Son has in himself the full nature of God. Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son’s sacrificial death on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven. (GNB)