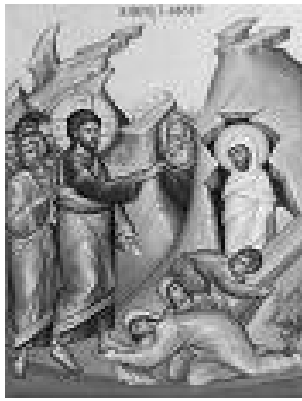


aspects of that message that they would not be entirely clear about. We know that from the conflict within communities that sometimes occurred (1 Cor. 2). As a result, these church groups sometimes created their own record of their beliefs. The apocryphal Gospels are examples of this.



Many of these Gospels consisted of so-called Gnostic views, as in the Gospels of Thomas, of Philip, of Mary (Magdalene) and of Peter. Gnostic beliefs differed from traditional religious ones in that they ascribed salvation not to those who obeyed the word of God, but to those who could decipher secrets hidden in sacred texts, the revealed information itself being the way to salvation. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, is not written in a biographical way like the canonical Gospels, but consists of 114 sayings of Jesus which believers thought contained secrets that revealed the way to Heaven.

Contrary to what several articles, books, and TV programmes purport to argue, these Apocryphal Gospels were not representative of the original apostolic preaching of the message of Jesus. It is argued that, given there were different interpretations of what Jesus taught, there never was a single defining teaching. However, the apostles did teach a particular message that formed the basis of the original Kerygma, and this became the standard against which subsequent variations were judged.

It is true that the later Church developed the basic teaching into concrete doctrines, and what came to be accepted as orthodox Christianity, the voice of the majority, did suppress other voices or treated them as heretical. But this is to be expected if the integrity of any community is to be preserved and certainly can not be used as evidence that the suppressed view must have been the original or correct one.

# Jesus in the Gospels

## 1. What Are the Gospels?



### Questions For Reflection

1. What genre of writing would you use to describe the Gospels?
2. Why are there four canonical Gospels and not one?
3. Why do you think it is that other (apocryphal) Gospels exist that are not accepted by the Church?

## What are the Gospels?

When Christians talk of the Gospels they usually mean the four canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These provide a record of the life of Jesus Christ and may, therefore, be described as biographies but they are more than that. They are the record of a living tradition about Jesus, and each has a theological emphasis. The word Gospel means 'good news' and here the significance of the Jesus story is hinted at.



For Christians, the Gospels bear nothing less than **the most important message** ever made to Humankind from God. The whole Bible is a sacred document but the Gospels are the most sacred part of that great book. A film once described the Jesus event as the 'Greatest Story Ever Told'. But it is not just an enthralling story; it is a message of eternal consequence for us all. The reality and depth of that message are truly epoch shattering. Each individual can now say with supreme confidence, '**God loves me**'.

The nature of revelation is that God reveals to His creation truths that would otherwise not be known, indeed could not be known by other means. The Gospels tell of the truth of the birth of the God-Man, Jesus, sent to provide a beacon to us in our sinfulness, to tell us of God's infinite love for us, his forgiveness of our sins, and to show everyone the pathway to reach him.

Through the Gospels, everyone can come to understand love in its supreme form. No matter what we face in our daily lives, if we can just pause to say '**God loves me**' and really believe that truth, then we shall be participating in the Gospel message and find peace as a result.

## The Formation of the Gospels

Our understanding of the Gospels can be helped enormously if we

understand how they came to be written. Jesus' life, his preaching, miracles and death were witnessed by many thousands of people. In particular, he attracted close followers. Some of these may have written down things about Jesus during his lifetime, although there is no evidence for this. What is certain is that after Jesus' death his disciples gave witness to his teaching and resurrection in their preaching and practices. Their witness was a 'faith' witness, a living witness, to perpetuate his message and to ensure it was spread throughout the known world. Although the disciples were there to verify the truth of any witness, Jesus' impact would almost certainly have led to written records being made of his sayings, his miracles and the main events in his life. The Gospels were the product of this process.



It is generally accepted that the first Christian writings we are aware of were the letters of St. Paul. The Gospels that bear the names of Matthew, Mark and Luke were probably written in the period 60-80 AD, and that of John around 80-90 AD.

It is important to remember that the process of writing the Gospels took time and reflection. There may have been several drafts before arriving at the Gospels we now have. Also, each writer may have had several sources of information on which to base their work, some of which may not have been available to the other writers. In addition, and very importantly, each writer had **their own theological message** to convey about Jesus in their work. It is worth remembering this when trying to reconcile the differences between the same events in different Gospels.

## The Apocryphal Gospels

The early Church consisted of many small communities. Each received and accepted the message about Jesus but there were many