



N E W E D I T I O N

LEADER'S MANUAL

SIMPLY | CHRISTIANITY

J O H N D I C K S O N

LEADER'S MANUAL

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INTRODUCTION

There are an increasing number of courses designed to help the ‘not-so-religious’ discover the meaning and relevance of the Christian Faith today. As you’d expect, they each have their own particular style, emphases and usefulness. But one assumption lies behind all of them: that bringing the gospel to people in small groups (or one-on-one), in the context of ongoing relationships, is an enriching and effective experience. We are well aware that large public proclamation—at guest services, concerts and rallies—has an important place in the life and mission of the Christian community, but we are also aware that smaller, ongoing gospel ministry is often the more crucial component in our overall task.

Speaking personally, and as an ‘evangelist’ who spends a lot of time speaking at public events, there is nothing more enjoyable than having a group of people over to my house once a week for a month or so to learn about Jesus Christ. The questions, the interaction, the friendships, the humour and the good food all combine to make an extremely enriching ministry experience. More than that, to see members of the group—who have fast become friends—actually come to admire and love Jesus, is the most rewarding experience of all.

Simply Christianity is designed for just this sort of ministry. It is a five-part course based entirely on the Gospel of Luke. The goal of the course is to surprise and challenge ordinary people (‘churched’ or ‘unchurched’) with the unique story of Jesus Christ as told by Luke.

The methodology of the course is simple: let the Gospel tell the gospel! The course closely follows the outline and themes found in the Gospel of Luke. It begins with a study on the reliability of Luke (and the Bible generally) as a reporter of true events. Then, as Luke introduces us to Jesus, we are confronted with the surprising authority and power of Jesus—an authority and power that is unique in both its extent and its purpose. For we soon discover that Jesus’ mission is not to conquer men and women with his great power, but to serve them. He has come to seek and to save the lost, to bring them back to their Creator. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, Luke brings his Gospel to a thrilling climax. Here we watch the powerful, authoritative Christ willingly sacrifice his life for a world loved by its Maker. We also watch him conquer death and rise to the right hand of God, from where he now offers the world his leadership and mercy.

In presenting this material, I have tried hard to let Luke tell the story his own way. This will hopefully mean that Christians of all denominational backgrounds will feel comfortable running the course for the people they have contact with. Within the parameters of Luke’s Gospel, leaders will have the opportunity to raise the questions they want to raise, to answer the questions that arise in their special context, and to apply the material in a way that seems most fitting for their particular group of people.

A further benefit of *Simply Christianity* is the fact that the very successful *Jesus* video* is also based on Luke’s Gospel. This means that segments from the video can be

shown to supplement the Bible readings. In some cases, where literacy may be a problem, the video could even replace reading portions from the Gospel itself. Another obvious advantage is that *Simply Christianity* can function as very effective follow-up to an outreach strategy that uses the *Jesus* video.

This brings us to a brief word about how to actually get a *Simply Christianity* course up and running. Because the course functions quite well in a one-on-one setting, you could simply ask a friend if they wanted to know what you believe by doing a short 5-part study. On the other hand, the course could be the more structured means of following up people who responded in some way to an outreach occasion.

Probably the most effective way of starting a course is to integrate it within an organized evangelistic program. That is, make the course the climax of a series of outreach events run over several weeks. At each event (church service, dinner, concert) encourage people who are curious to know more to join a short, informal course outlining the heart of Christianity.

The course was in fact developed in just this setting over a period of 18 months. The response was amazing. To those at St Clement's, Mosman, who supported this work, and to the many people who sat in my lounge-room, my warmest thanks.

In the following sections of this Leader's Manual, we'll be looking at how the course is put together, what it aims to do and how you can lead it.

I'd encourage you to take the time to read these sections carefully—they're not very long. I'd also be keen for you to pass on any feedback once you've run the course so we can make improvements in the future.

Thanks for your interest in *Simply Christianity*. I hope you find the experience of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ in this way as rewarding and as enriching as I have.

John Dickson
Sydney, 2003.



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Visit www.matthiasmedia.com.au for information about other books by John Dickson.

* Contact Matthias Media for details about how to get hold of the *Jesus* video. See page 2 for contact details.

ABOUT THE COURSE

1. The Values of the Course

Behind the course lie a number of important ‘values’ which influence the content, shape and usage of the material that follows. It is vital that each leader at least becomes acquainted with these values. Not everyone will agree with everything that follows, but a basic appreciation of these core values will make it a lot easier for the leader to remember, use and even modify the material in their own context.

a) Jesus and the gospel

There is a central principle to *Simply Christianity*, and it has to do with the nature of the gospel. The course is built on the assumption that to ‘evangelize’ means to declare the news about Jesus Christ. This may seem to be stating the obvious, but the implications of such a definition are far-reaching. It means that however much we may talk in the abstract about God, the problems of life, our sense of alienation, the reality of sin, the difference between grace and works, and so on, our evangelism is inadequate if it does not get past these things. It is not even adequate if Jesus is merely introduced at the crucial moment as the mechanism whereby God solves our problem. If the New Testament is anything to go by, our evangelism must be dominated by the proclamation of the event of Jesus and all that it means. The primary thrust of the gospel is how Jesus’ life, death and resurrection prove him to be the saving Lord of the world, to whom we must give allegiance.

Maintaining this emphasis helps us to avoid a common pitfall, which is the potential for evangelism to become very ‘me’ centred. That is, it is easy to give the impression that the gospel primarily has to do with my great problem and what I have to do (or not do) in order to find the solution. Time and time again, however, the Bible speaks of the gospel as the ‘gospel of God’, the ‘gospel of the Kingdom’, or the ‘gospel of Jesus Christ’. In other words, the gospel is primarily about what God has done to create his kingdom through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

From start to finish, then, this course tries to focus on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and how these events prove him to be the rightful Lord of our lives. Of course, ideas such as sin, judgement, atonement, grace and faith are by no means ignored. They are dealt with as they arise from Luke’s presentation of Jesus. The motto of this course is simply stated: let the Gospel tell the gospel.

b) Relationship with the members of the group (or individual)

Of course, it almost goes without saying, but another reminder won’t do any harm—relationship is vital to a successful gospel enterprise. The beauty of a course like this one, and many others like it, is that they are usually held in the home of the leader. This is an immediate sign to those attending that you are reasonably friendly. It takes

the meeting out of the Evening Course pigeon hole (a very common preconception) and into the real world of human relationships. Not only does this aid people's enjoyment and reception of the course, it also hints at something about the nature of the gospel we are trying to communicate. It suggests something of God's openness to people.

Several factors will enhance this sense of relationship within the group, and most of them have to do with your hospitality as the leader. If you are warm and welcoming from the first moment, you will be sending a strong signal to everyone that they are not entering the 'Twilight Zone'. Also, the more food and drink you make available the better.

Food and drink have always been great ice-breakers, and gospel work is no exception. People do not expect to come to a course about Christianity and be greeted with good food and drink. They realise that they are entering the home of an otherwise normal, hospitable, friendly person, not a strict, wowsery, 'religious' type.

It is also important that when you finish the formal part of each meeting you encourage people to stay on chatting (and eating and drinking). In fact, it is worth treating the social time (before and after) as part of the course. This means making sure you have left enough time at the end of the meeting for this informal interaction to take place, especially if you are meeting at night. People often don't like to be out after 9pm on a weeknight.

If one of your group misses a session without telling you, make sure you phone to see if everything is OK with them. If they phone to pull out of a session because of sickness, make sure you also ring them back a couple of days later to see how they are doing.

Prayer is also part of our relationship with those to whom we bring the gospel. Praying for each individual member of your group once or twice a week is a good habit to get into.

Another good habit is writing to each member of your group personally at the conclusion of the course. At the end of the five weeks, it is worth just dropping each of them a quick personal note saying how much you enjoyed their company and participation. Also assure them that if they have any further questions or comments to make, you would be delighted to hear from them.

All this can get quite time-consuming, but that's gospel work!

c) Relaxed atmosphere

This, of course, is related to the previous point. Much of the atmosphere of a session will be determined by the friendliness and hospitality of the leader/host. However, there are some other things that can help.

Make sure that your house and living room (or wherever the meeting occurs) is clean and tidy. A messy place can set visitors on edge, let alone the leader or host.

Also, make sure there are enough comfy chairs to sit on. If anyone has to be uncomfortable, make sure it is you, or perhaps one of the other Christians (a trainee for example) in the group. It is great to have 14 people in a course learning about Jesus, but not if six of them are sitting on the floor, bar stools, or divan.

Another suggestion is to have music playing softly for the duration of the meeting.

If you were having friends over for dessert and coffee you would probably keep the CDs going. It doesn't distract the conversation. Depending on the kind of people you're expecting in your group, the same could apply. In fact, some music playing in the background can often fill that 'silent space' that can occur when a group of people who don't know each other gather for an hour or so. Just make sure it is appropriate music (i.e. the kind that your guests would enjoy) and that it is not too loud. It might be a good idea to avoid your collection of classic hymns.

d) Non-threatening

It is hard for us to imagine how nerve-racking it must be for a person to go into a stranger's home to investigate a topic as strange (to them) as Christianity. The nerves you will feel on the first evening of the first time you run this course are a helpful insight into half the terror in the minds of the members of your group as they knock on your front door for the first time. Anything you can do to set people at ease is a good thing.

For this reason, it is vital that a non-threatening and non-confronting approach is adopted in the running of this course. Several things can help.

Firstly, never ask a member of your group to read the Bible out loud. Quite a lot of Bible passages will be read out over the five weeks, and you (or a trainee) should do them all. Remember how you felt in school being asked to read out to the class? Reading the Bible for an adult is approximately as daunting.

Also, it is probably not wise to pray at the beginning or end of any session. Of course, you should pray before people arrive and after they leave, but there seems little point introducing people to the idea of chatting to the Creator when they are not even yet sure about chatting to you.

Another thing to avoid is asking any member of your group a directly religious question. It is fine to ask, "So Matt, what do you do with your time?" but not, "So Matt, what do you think Christianity is about?" or even, "So Matt, why did you decide to do this course?". If your group is getting on really well together, and seems comfortable in expressing their opinions about a wide range of subjects, you might ask questions of the group—such as the 'discussion starter' ideas that are listed in the leader's notes for each session. However, be sensitive to the group dynamics. Put yourself in your guests' position, and try not to embarrass them. In most groups I have run, I would not even ask a group member what they think a certain Bible passage means. Apart from making them feel undue pressure to wax eloquent on a topic they may have only thought about twice in their life, you may, in fact, get an unhelpful answer which you will then have to proceed to correct.

Speaking of unhelpful answers, another thing to watch for is how you correct any incorrect statements made by a member of your group. In general, it is probably best to allow 'heresy' to go unchecked. If a member of your group says, "Oh, I think all religions take you to the same truth about God", it is not absolutely essential you set them straight right away. This is especially important in the first few sessions, when you may not have had time to foster the trust and respect needed for a 'corrective' to

take place. My suggestion is just to allow unhelpful comments to pass by the group. In the end, if the leader has done his or her job well, the group will respond far more to the material in the course than to the occasional erroneous comment from one of the members. Of course, if a member of the group is being decidedly antagonistic and unhelpful in their comments (a very, very rare thing in my experience), by all means gently respond with a few strong arguments. Remember though, in speaking to the ‘heretic’ you are also speaking to 5-10 others who are observing not only what you have to say, but how you say it.

These comments do not, however, apply to questions a member may ask you. So for example someone in the group may say, “Oh, I’ve always just assumed all religions taught essentially the same thing. Is that right?” In this case, by all means, answer as best you can. They have given you permission to correct them.

In the end, a non-threatening approach is often the most kind approach, and often the most successful too.

2. Overview of the Course

One of the beauties of restricting the course to Luke’s Gospel is that by the end of the five weeks people really feel that they understand one whole book of the Bible. For the person who has never gone near a Bible (or at least not for a very long time) this makes God’s word a less daunting and far more accessible book than they ever imagined. It is not uncommon, in my experience, for people to have finished reading the Gospel of Luke by the second or third week (even though their homework only requires them to reach the middle of Luke) and to have started on John of their own initiative.

This almost sole focus on the Gospel of Luke determines not only the content of the course, but also its overall structure. The Gospel of Luke falls into two parts. The first focuses on Jesus’ authority and power as God’s Messiah. The second tells how Jesus’ Messianic authority is not used to conquer men and women, but to serve them by giving his life for their salvation. The hinge between these two sections falls in chapter 9, as the disciples (for the first time) realise and declare Jesus to be the Messiah. From that moment on, Jesus begins to explain to them that his role, as the Messiah, is to suffer, die and rise again. He sets his face towards Jerusalem and begins the journey towards his death and resurrection.

Based on this structure, the overall pattern of the course can be seen in the following table:

Session	Summary	Main ideas
1. Jesus, Now and Then	An introductory session focusing on the reliability of the Gospel record about Jesus' life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christianity is unique among the religions in its focus on a person. It is not about ethics or philosophy or ritual. • Jesus' life is spoken of in various ancient documents (Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny, Suetonius). We know he lived, amazed people, died, and was reported to be raised from the dead. • The most comprehensive information about Jesus comes from the biographies (Gospels) of his life. We will look at Luke. • These biographies (and the Bible generally) are trustworthy. That is, documentary evidence is plentiful, it has not changed significantly over the years, and the writers are trustworthy.
2. In the Presence of Greatness (Luke 1-9)	A session devoted to explaining Jesus' authority as Christ.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Images of Jesus through the years often emphasized his meekness/weakness—baby in a manger, blessing children, naked on a cross. Luke's biography begins with a significantly different emphasis. • The title 'Christ' essentially points to Jesus' right to speak and act powerfully on God's behalf. This is seen in the opening chapters of Luke's biography in terms of Jesus' authority to overcome evil, heal, forgive people's sins, control the environment and call on people to 'repent' and 'follow him'. • Even so, there are hints from the beginning that the power and greatness of this Messiah would be expressed in a way no-one expected.
3. Search and Rescue (Luke 10-19)	A session that explains Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the moment the disciples finally confess Jesus to be 'the Christ', Jesus turns all their expectations about this ruler upside down. It turns out he has not come to conquer humanity with his power, but to serve humanity by seeking out the lost and bringing them back home to their Creator.
4. Jesus' Death (Luke 20-23)	A session emphasizing the meaning and importance of Jesus' death.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The death of Jesus is a central event of the Christian Faith. What is its meaning? Jesus considered his death to be drinking the 'cup' of God's judgement. The crucifixion narrative itself also tells us that Jesus died so that access to God may be opened up (the tearing of the temple curtain).
5. Jesus, Here and Now (Luke 24)	A concluding session emphasising the resurrection and describing what responding to Jesus means today.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to Jesus' own words, responding to him involved two things. • 'Repentance'—this is a change of attitude before it is a change of lifestyle. • 'Forgiveness'—all our wrongs are forgiven and forgotten. • People are urged to consider whether they have repented and asked for forgiveness.
Dinner:	Though not officially part of the course, it is important to end each group with a pleasant social occasion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The benefits of ending with a dinner or some other social occasion are several. For starters, it is a good time for them to give back the Feedback Forms they were given as homework in the final session. More importantly, however, it sets the whole experience firmly in a relationship with you and the other members of the group. It also shows them that religion is not the only context in which you can relate to them.

3. A Typical Session

A typical session will fall into five parts:

a) Social

The session should begin with a healthy social component. Lots of food and drink make for a very comfortable environment. Remember, many of the people in your group will be very nervous about doing the course. Spending the first 20 minutes or so simply eating, drinking and chatting will help enormously. If you are more ambitious, and have the time and resources to do so, you could even start each session with a meal. This is great in terms of social interaction and building the relationships, but has real costs, both financial and in terms of the time each session takes. It might be difficult to have dinner, conduct the session, and still be finished at a reasonable hour.

b) Presentation

This, of course, is the focus of the night. Each presentation (by the leader) should take approximately 20-25 minutes. It can begin with a 'discussion starter' if you think your group is ready to handle it, but then the presentation is basically a talk which follows the Session Outline in each Guest's Manual. Personal stories and brief chit-chat are to be encouraged within this framework. Questions of clarification relating to the presentation should also be encouraged during this time. So, for instance, at the end of each subheading you may wish to ask, "Is that clear enough?" or "Any questions about that so far?". Basically, however, you should move through the presentation as smoothly as possible.

c) Questions

Questions about all manner of topics will occasionally arise, but, by having the official question time after the presentation, you are subconsciously encouraging questions that relate to Luke's portrait of Jesus and what it means for us. When you ask, "OK, are there any questions about the presentation, or about something you read in Luke's Gospel, or even about a related issue?" you should be aware that the first question is usually slow in coming. Give a few moments for that question to show itself, but if no questions come after 30 seconds or so, do not ask again or leave more silence.

On the issue of questions, it is vital that you are well-read. We recommend that you have at least read Leon Morris's commentary in the Tyndale series, to get a serious grasp on the Gospel of Luke and perhaps one of the apologetics resources recommended in 'Troubleshooting' later in this manual (pp.18-19). It is an important responsibility of a leader to be knowledgeable and confident about the general topic. If you are slack in this regard, your group may be disappointed.

Having said this, it is not important that you appear to be an expert. There is no shame in saying, "I've not thought about that issue too much. Can I get back to you on that one?". If you are too 'brilliant' you may actually make people feel a little nervous about what they say in front of you and the rest of the group.

d) Wrap up

After the question time, a short wrap-up (of 3-4 minutes) is essential, especially when questions have wandered far afield. It focuses everyone's attention on the main point of the session. The wrap-up is also the time to advise people of the homework for the following week and what to look out for in Luke's Gospel in preparation for the following session.

e) Social

Finishing with more food, drink and conversation puts the whole session in the context of warm, developing friendships.

SIMPLY | CHRISTIANITY

SESSION

1

JESUS, NOW AND THEN

1. 'Christ'-ianity

As the word suggests, 'Christianity' is all about a person, Jesus Christ. In fact, Christianity could be defined simply as 'responding appropriately to Jesus Christ'.

2. Information about Jesus?

a) Non-Christian Documents about Jesus

What they tell us about Jesus:

- when he lived
- where he lived
- that he was Jewish
- that he assumed the role of a public teacher
- that he attracted great crowds
- that he engaged in activities thought to be supernatural
- that he was executed; when and by whom
- that he had a brother called James who was subsequently executed
- that people claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his death
- that he was widely known by the prestigious Jewish title, 'the Christ'

b) The Biographies of Jesus' Life

- The Gospel of Matthew is famous for its lengthy record of Jesus' great ethical teachings.
- The Gospel of Mark is famous for its short, punchy style.
- The Gospel of Luke is famous for its emphasis on Jesus' friendship with 'non-religious' people.
- The Gospel of John is famous for its profound insight into the nature of Jesus.

Over the next five sessions, we will look at the Gospel of Luke.

3. Who was Luke?

- medical doctor, historian and intrepid traveller
- not an eyewitness to Jesus but a reporter of eyewitness accounts
- research began in the 50s AD; probably completed work some time between 70-80 AD
- highly educated Greek man

Luke's aim was to present the most accurate and relevant material on Jesus (read Luke 1:1-4).

4. The Big Idea

Christianity at its heart is not about rules or rituals but about a person, Jesus Christ – a person we can get to know through reading the Gospel of Luke.

5. At Home

For next week please read Luke 1-9 (or, if you run short of time, 4:14-5:39 and 7:36-9:22) and ask yourself: According to Luke, who is Jesus and what has he come to do? Note down anything you don't understand, or would like to discuss. We'll have a time for discussion next week.

Hand out Guest Manuals.

Begin with welcome and introductions. Perhaps just ask people to mention their names and how they spend most of their time. Suggestion: start with your co-leader or trainee and end with yourself. Then begin as follows...

- Let me begin by saying two important things about the nature of this course we're embarking on together:
 - First, I should make it clear up-front that this course does not focus on the teachings of a particular church or denomination but on those facts about Jesus Christ that Christians throughout the ages have agreed on. It is not therefore Anglican Christianity, Presbyterian Christianity, Roman Catholic Christianity or Baptist Christianity—it is 'simply' Christianity.
 - The second thing I should say is that the course has twin emphases. *On the one hand, the course is 'historical' in nature.* Hopefully that doesn't conjure up bad memories about school history classes. All I mean is that Christianity is about events that happened at a particular time and place; it is about a person who said and did certain things. In order to explore these things all these years later we need to do a bit of detective work with some very, very old writings, written almost two thousand years ago.

On the other hand, the course is deliberately 'practical'! It tries constantly to answer questions such as: What do these old writings mean today?

What difference does Christian faith make in terms of one's perspective on life or day-to-day challenges?

- Are there any questions about the nature of the course...
- OK, let's begin with a working definition of Christianity...

1. 'Christ'-ianity

- At its heart Christianity is not a complex philosophical system like Buddhism, a code of morals like Islam, or a set of rituals as some Christian churches have presented it.
- The crucial starting point for this course is that...

As the word suggests, 'Christianity' is all about a person, Jesus Christ. In fact, Christianity could be defined simply as 'responding appropriately to Jesus Christ'.

- For some of us, this working definition may mean putting aside some of what we presumed Christianity was, and for the next five weeks just allowing this definition to be the starting point: "Responding appropriately to Jesus Christ."
- Since Christianity is all about Jesus Christ, the obvious point at which to begin our exploration of the man is to ask: What information have we got about Jesus?
- Our information about Jesus comes from a number of very ancient reports about his life. Some of these were written by people in the period who were not Christians; others were written by people in the period who clearly were Christians.

2. Information about Jesus?

a) Non-Christian Documents about Jesus

- If you're interested in reading the non-Christian references to Jesus from the period, the Extra Information for Session One contains a useful account of who wrote them and what they said.

If you feel that your participants would be interested, turn to the Extra Information and read them one or two of these references. I would suggest Tacitus and the Talmud (see pp.30-34).

- For now, you might just be interested in a summary of what these 'non-Christian' reports tell us about the life of Jesus. It includes the following:

What they tell us about Jesus:

- when he lived
- where he lived
- that he was Jewish
- that he assumed the role of a public teacher
- that he attracted great crowds
- that he engaged in activities thought to be supernatural
- that he was executed; when and by whom
- that he had a brother called James who was subsequently executed
- that people claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his death
- that he was widely known by the prestigious Jewish title, 'the Christ'
- Clearly, these documents provide only the broadest outline of Jesus' life. They tell us little about what he was like, what he said to the crowds, what he felt life was all about, and hundreds of other questions people have been

curious to ask over the years.

- For this kind of detail, we need to look at documents written by people with more than just a casual interest in Jesus. I am talking about the biographies of Jesus' life.

b) The Biographies of Jesus' Life

- Our detailed knowledge of Jesus comes from the ancient biographies of his life, called 'Gospels'. There are four of them:

The Gospel of Matthew is famous for its lengthy record of Jesus' great ethical teachings.

- Many of those great sayings you may have heard—'turn the other cheek'; 'blessed are the peacemakers'; 'our Father who art in Heaven'—come from Matthew's biography.

The Gospel of Mark is famous for its short, punchy style.

- It is a brilliant read if you have about an hour to discover the meaning of the world's most influential man.

The Gospel of Luke is famous for its emphasis on Jesus' friendship with 'non-religious' people.

- Here we read about Jesus castigating the hypocritical religious hierarchy of his day and yet welcoming prostitutes, enemy soldiers and 'secular' businessmen.

The Gospel of John is famous for its profound insight into the nature of Jesus.

- Although the story is the same, the angle from which John comes at Jesus is quite amazing.

Over the next five sessions, we will look at the Gospel of Luke.

- The course is based on this biography partly because of its focus on Jesus' friendships with the 'not-so-religious'. This makes it the ideal read for anyone who feels religious matters are a little foreign. Although it is not as short as Mark's biography, there are still fewer words in Luke than in the sports lift-out in the weekend paper. For a book written almost 2000 years ago on the other side of the world, it is actually a very easy read.
- By the end of the course you'll be able to say that you have read one whole book of the Bible and know exactly what it says about Jesus. That puts you in the driver's seat, so to speak, in terms of being able to make an intelligent decision about the relevance of Christianity for your life.
- So, who was Luke? And where was he coming from?

3. Who was Luke?

- Luke, a medical doctor and historian, probably completed his biography some time between 70-80AD, though his research for the book began at a much earlier date.
- He had not personally known Christ but he had spoken with, and based his work on, those who had. In fact, several times during the 50s AD Luke had the privileged experience of travelling and working with one of the key eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection, a man known as the Apostle Paul. Paul wrote no fewer than 13 of the

other books in the New Testament. For Luke, this must have been a time of great inspiration as well as fruitful research for his own account of the life of Jesus.

- These experiences, combined with the fact that he was a man of high education—as indicated by the literary Greek of his biography—made him perfectly suited to produce a work of such importance.
- **medical doctor, historian and intrepid traveller**
- **not an eyewitness to Jesus but a reporter of eyewitness accounts**
- **research began in the 50s AD; probably completed work some time between 70-80 AD**
- **highly educated Greek man**

- But before we read the opening sentences of Luke's biography, where he tells us why and how he wrote the work, I should acknowledge that sometimes people have doubts about how reliable a book like this is. Some people ask: Can we trust what we read in this book? How do we know it hasn't changed over the years? How do we know Luke didn't just make the whole thing up?
- It's probably no surprise to learn that all of these questions have more than adequate answers—otherwise Christianity would have dried up years ago. But since not everyone is interested in such questions, the material dealing with these issues has been placed in the Extra Information section. Feel free to read it at your leisure.

Note to leader: If you have access to it and you feel your group would be

interested, use material from the video presentation *Messages from the Memory Banks* at this point (available through your local Christian bookstore). Use the following introduction:

- Because this is a topic that requires a certain amount of expertise, it will sound better coming from experts in this field. We're now going to watch a short video that deals with this question of whether we can trust the ancient biographies of Jesus' life.
- For now it might be worth just reading the opening paragraph of Luke's Gospel.

Luke's aim was to present the most accurate and relevant material on Jesus (read Luke 1:1-4).

Note to leader: Before reading Luke 1:1-4 you may need to explain how to use the large bold heading to find the chapter, and the small number in the text to find the verse. Practise a couple throughout Luke, then read the opening paragraph.

Give an opportunity for questions now, then wrap up by reading out the 'Big Idea'.

4. The Big Idea

Christianity at its heart is not about rules or rituals but about a person, Jesus Christ—a person we can get to know through reading the Gospel of Luke.

- This first session may have felt a little weighted toward the 'historical' aspect of Christianity. I guess that's appropriate considering its the introduction to the topic.

- Let me conclude today/night by telling you how Christianity came to be part of my life and what difference it has made to me.

Leader should now spend 3-5 minutes (no longer) explaining how Christianity came to be (or remain) part of his/her life. Be sure to include practical examples of the difference Jesus makes in your life. In keeping with the whole point of session one, keep the focus of your story upon Jesus himself. Also, do not feel the need to explain the whole gospel through your story. You have four more weeks to do that. Just choose pertinent, 'introductory' themes which you feel will be helpful to group members.

If you have not told your story in any detail previously, refer to the following section, *Telling Your Story*.

Now advise participants of the homework.

5. At Home

For next week please read Luke 1-9 (or, if you run short of time, 4:14-5:39 and 7:36-9:22) and ask yourself: According to Luke, who is Jesus and what has he come to do? Note down anything you don't understand, or would like to discuss. We'll have a time for discussion next week.

- Thank you very much for coming; please stay for more food and drink, or feel free to go when you need to.

TELLING YOUR STORY

In the New Testament, the word 'testimony' usually refers to an official declaration about Jesus and his resurrection (usually by someone who witnessed the events), not the speaker's Christian life. For this reason, we will call a story of personal faith simply your 'story', not your 'testimony'.

1) Three Kinds Of Stories

a) ALWAYS A CHRISTIAN

Those who have been brought up knowing Christ have a unique story to tell. It won't be a dramatic 'before-and-after' epic but it will have its own appeal and power. The 'conversion'-style drama has actually become a bit of a cliché in our society so the 'always-a-Christian' story may in fact be more intriguing to many.

b) NOT ALWAYS A CHRISTIAN

As long as 'before-and-after' stories are not overstated, such accounts of conversion can be very useful in helping interested non-Christians picture what it is like to move from their own position to a Christian one.

c) RETURNED CHRISTIAN

Some believers were brought up loving God but turned their back on him for some time before returning with renewed faith. This type of story will have elements in common with both 'a' and 'b' above.

2) Why Use Your Story?

a) IT IS INTERESTING

On the whole people are interesting. A story of someone being or becoming 'religious' is an unusual and rare enough tale to keep the average person reasonably (if only briefly) attentive.

b) IT AVOIDS ARGUMENTS

Many people find it daunting to talk openly about 'God and stuff'. Your story of faith keeps the focus on something less scary—you! Furthermore, discussions about non-personal ideas (such as creation or hell) are easy to turn into arguments. Your own story, on the other hand, is pretty hard to argue with. People will rarely attack another person's personal experience.

c) IT IS EASY TO REMEMBER

Some of us find it hard to remember complete 'gospel outlines' and are worried about getting it 'right'. Telling your own story takes the pressure off a little. With a bit of practice most of us will be able to tell our own story in an accurate and engaging way.

3) Things To Avoid

a) FOCUSING ON 'SELF'

It is very easy to focus entirely on yourself and forget that what you're meant to be doing is explaining how you came to follow *Jesus*. Jesus should be the 'star' of your own story.

b) MISSING OUR DEEPEST NEED

It is also easy to turn our story into a tale of having our personal, psychological needs met by Jesus, as if Jesus were the 'great social worker in the sky'. In talking of the needs Jesus meets we should particularly mention our need for forgiveness of sins.

c) EMPHASIZING 'BEFORE'

Another easy mistake (for those with a 'not always a Christian' or 'returned Christian' story) is talking too much about 'before' and not enough about 'since'. Our emphasis should be not so much on our sinful journey before we knew God, but on the impact of God's grace on our lives since coming to know him.

d) EXAGGERATING

"Never let the facts get in the way of a good story", a famous cricketer once remarked. This should never be the case in our story of faith. Christ does not need our 'amazing' story to convince someone to be a Christian. Just tell it like it was and is! If you can make it funnier or more interesting, well and good, but do not stretch the truth.

4) What Makes A Good Story Of Faith?

a) PREPARE WHAT YOU WILL SAY

You don't want your story to sound 'rehearsed', but nor do you want it to sound confused. It is a good idea to work out the key moments and ideas that you want to convey.

b) TELL ACTUAL STORIES AND EVENTS

Most of us have particular occasions and people that had a big influence on our faith. Try to describe these in some detail so that your listener can picture you in

that situation. The more they can picture you, the easier it will be for them to imagine themselves coming to believe in Christ. To give an example, instead of saying, "Someone explained that I needed forgiveness...", say something like, "I'd been invited to the home of my high school Scripture teacher and sitting in her beautiful, comfy lounge chair this middle-aged mum explained in a really simple way that I needed forgiveness..."

c) SPEAK NATURALLY

When an opportunity arises to speak to someone about your faith, it is all too easy to slip into 'evangelism mode'—the heart pounds, the five points of your gospel presentation race through your head, your voice speeds up and/or gets louder, etc! This is understandable, but to be avoided. When an occasion comes along, just take a slow, silent breath, say a quick 'Bless me Lord' (in your head), and speak naturally—as if you were telling a joke, a sports story, or something you saw on TV last night. The purpose of the welcome at the beginning of this Session was to illustrate the natural style in which stories from your life can be told. Speaking of your story of faith should be no different.

Exercise

1. On a piece of paper draw a timeline (from 0 to your current age) down the left-hand side of the page. Note down (in rough order) everything you can think of that contributed significantly to your present faith in Christ.
2. Now select the three or four most important points on the time-line and write down your story (using the above tips as a guide) on one A4 piece of paper (in note form if you wish).
3. Look for an opportunity to tell someone your story—a friend at church, a family member, or whomever—to gain more confidence in the way you present your material.