

# Chapter 1: The Historical Jesus

## Student Preparation

Students were assigned to read Chapter 1, "The Historical Jesus," pp. 29-57.

## Warm-up (about 20 minutes)

- Remind students that Martin Luther King, Jr. died in 1968; the gap between his death and our time is approximately equal to the time between Jesus' death and the earliest written accounts of his life. Break students into groups of two or three. Have them pretend they are going to write a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. Have them jot down the answers to the following questions, and then facilitate a discussion. Who would they talk to? Where would they go to gather information? How would they decide which sources were reliable? Could they gather enough information to write a reasonably accurate life of King? If there were no TV or newspapers, would they still be able to write a good summary of the "I Have a Dream" speech? Why? Why not?
- Assign the activity under "Rate Your Relationship" on page 30. Facilitate a discussion, inviting each person to answer at least one question aloud.
- A Christian is someone who believes in Jesus and follows him. Ask the students what they consider to be the distinguishing marks of a Christian: kindness? morality? knowledge about Jesus? attending Mass? Who are some people they consider to be exemplary Christians?

## Part 1:

### Lesson (about 30 minutes)

*Text Reference: Historical Evidence for the Existence of Jesus, The Scriptures and Jesus (29-41)*

- Write the following names on the board: **Tacitus, Seutonius, Pliny the Younger, Josephus**. Ask students to name the role of each of these writers (Roman biographer, Jewish historian, etc.) and the perspective each brought (hostile, admiring, etc.) Jot these notes beside each name.
- Discuss why it is important to know that there are non-Christian references to Jesus. Comments from an "opposing camp" can be helpful in letting us know something is true. For example, if a person praises the integrity of an opponent, it is most likely true that the opponent possesses that virtue.
- Have students read the first two paragraphs on inspiration (page 37) aloud. What does this mean? Draw a continuum on the board to explain the meaning of inspiration described in the text:

Purely independent  
human effort

Holy Spirit  
dictated word for word

Place an "X" to indicate the Church's teaching about inspiration. Facilitate a discussion helping the students understand this concept.

- Refer back to the students' discussion about Martin Luther King, Jr. If they were going to compile a list of books which accurately portray Dr. King, what standards would they use for including books? Write their answers on the board, and compare to the principles on pages 38-39. "Conformity to the rule of faith" would mean that books accurately portray the teachings of Dr. King and, in the case of Scripture, of Jesus. Then break the students into small groups. Write on the board,
  - A "letter to those who meet at Martha's house" distributed within a five-mile area.
  - A "gospel of James" appears suddenly around the year 175.
  - A "second letter to the Hebrews" claims that Jesus ordered his followers to beat anyone who would not proclaim him to be God the Father disguised as a human.

Have students apply the criteria to these examples.

- In what ways does the Gospel of Thomas (page 39) *not* meet the standards for inclusion in the canon?
- Have students take out their Bibles. Referring to the Table of Contents, review the "New Testament Books and Quick Facts" information on pages 40-41. Have students compete, individually or in small

groups, in finding the first page of books of the New Testament as you call them out. If desired, give points for “first” answers, and reward winners with a special treat at break.

### *Break/Writing Exercise (about 15 minutes)*

- Join students for a break with refreshments.
- Read “The Man and the Birds” (pages 38-39 in the Teacher’s Manual) aloud to the students. Have them write a journal reflection on the story.

## **Part 2:**

### *Lesson (about 30 minutes)*

*Text Reference: The Formation of the Gospels, How the Church Interprets the Gospels (pp. 42-56)*

- Review the three stages of development of the Gospels (Jesus’ public life, oral tradition, and New Testament writings.) Explain to students that non-literate people develop their ability to memorize and pass on information accurately in ways that we, who rely on the written word, do not. Point out the relatively short time between Jesus’ death and the writing of the New Testament.
- Ask students what critical thinking means. “Criticism” in this sense simply means to think actively in order to better understand something. “Biblical criticism” is using all the skills at our disposal to accurately understand the message of the Scriptures.
- Have students turn to page 47 and have the students review the text and the graphic. Then describe what a modern-day scenario would look like if three reporters followed the same process in writing a story.
- Have students discuss what would be the similarities and differences among a poem, a newspaper story, a sermon, and a journal entry written about a drive-by shooting. Ask: If you were simply given the text for each, would you be able to tell which category they belong in? How? Review the forms listed on page 50.
- Bring at least three different translations of the New Testament to class. Have students read the Golden Rule, Matthew 7:12, from each translation. Ask: Which do you prefer? Why?
- Assign the questions on the Genealogy of Jesus on page 52. Allow ten minutes for completion.

### *Prayer Experience (about 15 minutes)*

- Decide on a way to transition into an atmosphere of prayer. It can be helpful if you use something to signal change like a candle, music, a “prayer corner” of the room, or a small altar. A picture of Jesus is especially appropriate for this course.
- Have one person read aloud “One Solitary Life” from pages 29-30 (remember to finish the reading on page 30).
- Invite students to remember people of faith who have touched their lives. Give thanks for those people and the countless others who have inspired the world through lives of faith.
- Invite students to offer petitions or prayers of thanks. Encourage them to remember both immediate concerns and those for the world.
- Conclude prayer by listening to an appropriate piece of music.

### *Conclusion (5 minutes)*

- Have students do the Review Questions on pages 55-56 in preparation for the following week.
- Assign students to read Chapter 2, “The New Testament World of Jesus,” pages 58-83.