

## BACK TO THE BASICS

# THE NEW TESTAMENT IN A NUTSHELL

The message of Jesus Christ is a message for all men in every age. During His life on earth, Christ revealed God to the men of His time. He told them about God. He showed them what God is like.

But what about us, the men and women of the twentieth century? How do we hear the authentic voice of Christ today?

During His lifetime, Christ set up His Church. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Church continues His presence in the world. Christ commanded His Apostles to go and teach all nations. He sent the Holy Spirit to help them to understand everything He had taught them. From then on they, and their successors, were to be his messengers. Through them Christ would speak to all men.

The source of all the Church's teaching, then, is Christ Himself. The Church's mission is to preserve and to hand on faithfully the teaching of Jesus.

How does the Church do this? In two ways: through the Holy Tradition of the Church, and through the written Word of God, the Scriptures. Holy Tradition embodies the ongoing life of the Church. Within Holy Tradition, we find a wide variety of essentials to our faith: our worship, icons, the lives of the saints, and so on. All of these things revealed God through the ages, and continue to reveal Him in our own time. Yet it is the the Bible, especially the New Testament, through which we come into contact with Christ through His own words.

The New Testament, as the written record of the life and teachings of Christ, is intimately linked to the preaching of the Apostles, the first Christian witnesses and messengers.

### UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT

Our first step in understanding the wonders of the New Testament is this: for nearly thirty-five years the New Testament did not exist! It wasn't read when the very first Christians came together for worship. It wasn't read in private. It simply did not exist. What, then, was happening during those thirty-five years?

From the earliest times the Jewish faith revolved around the Old Testament. The reading of the Scriptures was the highlight of the synagogue service. This service began by the reciting of the creed of Judaism, some prayers were said, the Rabbi said a few words, but then — and this was why the people came — the Scriptures were read.

The early Christians were primarily Jews. They had been brought up to love and revere the word of God. It was hardly likely, then, that these first Jewish converts would leave the precious Scriptures behind them. And they did not. When the synagogue doors were closed to them, the Scriptures went with them. Undoubtedly the Old Testament was read at all Christian services — it was the sacred book of the early Church. But there is an important question which needs to be answered. Why did it take thirty-

five years before anyone felt the need of a book about Jesus Christ?

One simple reason was this. As long as the Apostles were still alive, there was no thought of a written book. The Apostles had lived with Christ, they had known Him intimately. They had seen Him live, die and rise from the dead. The Apostles were the "living books" on which the Christian message was written. They were the eyewitnesses, and as long as they lived, books were not necessary.

There were other reasons, too. The age in which the first Christians lived was a non-literary one. Mass-produced printing was a long way off. And the first Christians were, for the most part, poor and uncultured. They simply could not read.

How, then, did the New Testament come to be? We do not have to look far beyond our own experience for the answer. The Apostles were only human. Even if they were to escape martyrdom, death had to come. The living books would close forever.

Christ had commanded them to "go, preach the Gospel to all nations." Soon Christians would take the Gospel to Rome, to a cultured people, to a city where books were mass-produced by the sweated labor of thousands of slaves.

These missionaries would also have to face new problems. Even only a few years after the resurrection, strange teachings about Christ began to appear. Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life, must not be betrayed.

The time had come for a clear, definite statement of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The early Church was about to give birth to the New Testament.

## HOW THE GOSPELS WERE FORMED

Stage One: The Life of Jesus. When Christ was born in Bethlehem, God became man. The men and women who saw Jesus Christ saw, in a way they could understand, what God was really like. But from the very outset He called twelve men — the Apostles — to be special observers, special witnesses of these momentous years. These men saw Him show compassion to the poor and the sinner. They saw Him heal the sick. They heard Him speak in a simple language everyone could understand. They were the special witnesses: the

## The source of all the Church's teaching is Christ Himself!

men who knew with certainty why He did these things. They knew that Jesus Christ had come to bring a message of salvation to all men.

Stage Two: The Preaching of the Apostles. "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:16). The Apostles were now well equipped to carry out this last command of Jesus. They set out to teach men about Christ, and like Him, did so in as simple a manner as possible. Their intimate knowledge of Jesus meant they could give their hearers a vivid picture of His life and teaching. They could describe His miracles in minute detail and repeat His stories and teaching accurately.

But that was not enough. How could they best show that these stories and miracles pointed to something deeper, that Jesus Christ was truly the Savior of the world?

It would be no use just telling random stories of His life and death. The Apostles were teachers and any teacher knows you cannot teach well in a disorderly way. The material would have to be arranged carefully to help their listeners understand all about Christ.

And so, for maximum effect, the Apostles put their knowledge of Jesus into orderly scheme.

In their preaching they grouped miracles together to show how everyone could share in this new life. They selected parables which urged their listeners to follow Christ.

So, we can see emerging a most important fact about the formation of the Gospels. Even before the first Gospel was written, the life and teaching of Christ was being put into an accepted order.

And *more importantly*, this was being done by the Apostles, the men who really knew Christ, the men He had chosen to be His chief witnesses.

Stage Three: The Evangelists. The Jewish memory was extremely retentive. Once the Apostles had grouped the miracles, parables and teaching of Jesus into a set order, their listeners would not easily forget. The words of the Apostles would be firmly imprinted on their memory. This helps us to understand the part played by the evangelists, the Gospel writers.

They did not write a book in the sense that we speak of a modern author writing a book. They put into writing that which was at first passed on by word of mouth.

Their work — and this is a most wonderful thing — brings us into direct contact with the preaching of the Apostles, the official witnesses of Christ's life.

## THE 'CANON' OF SCRIPTURE

The early Christians were very conscious of the need to become good listeners. Like us, they believed that Christ spoke to them through the books of Scripture. Naturally, however, when doubts were expressed about the origin of certain books, they found it very difficult to be patient listeners. They wanted to identify beyond all doubt the voice they were listening to. They wanted to be sure that it really was Christ speaking to them.

The New Testament is really a collection of many different books — twenty-seven in all. The story of how this collection grew into the New Testament is an extremely complicated one and is partly a secret of history. But one thing is certain. The early Christians did not gather together all the writings about Christ at random. Only a very special type of book or letter could be given a place in this unique collection.

Jesus Christ gave his Apostles a special authority, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit, made them the successors of the prophets. That is the full meaning of the words, "He who hears you, hears me." And that is why the first Christians were so concerned to gather together those writings which derived from the apostles. These were the men who were the eyewitnesses of the life and teaching of Jesus. When these men wrote and spoke they were speaking and writing the Word of God. There could be no doubt that Christ spoke to His Church in these writings.

The task of gathering together

The apostolic writings was not an easy one. There were many arguments about which books would be included and which excluded. By the fifth century A.D., however, the Church had gathered these precious books and writings together into a special collection which they called the "Canon of the New Testament." The word canon is a Greek word meaning a rule of measure. These books, then, were a sort of measure for all Christians. And it is against these books that the Church still measures its faith and practice.

### THE CHURCH'S BOOK

In a unique way, the Bible brings the past into the present. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, the words of Christ first uttered two thousand years ago and recorded by the Gospel writers, are still effective today. Christ's words of healing still heal. Christ's words of forgiveness still forgive. Christ's words of warning still warn.

The Epistle to the Hebrews clearly expresses this truth. "The word of God," it says, "is something alive and active: it cuts like any double-edged sword but foretells the truth finely" (Hebrews 4:12). The word of God is a sword which cuts! Clearly, then, great care must be taken as to who wields this sword. For in the hands of a madman it can destroy many innocent people.

That is why Christ gave His apostles the authority to teach. As long as the word of God is "alive and active," authority is needed to wield it safely. And the only proper authority is the voice of Christ Himself in His Church.

The New Testament was written by the Church. The Gospels reflected the teaching of the apostles who infallibly preached all they had witnessed of Christ's

life. The Church can look back on her long life of nearly two thousand years in the light of her constant teaching declare: "When this Scripture was written, this was meant . . . I know what I meant."

We know how important it is to read what someone has said in its context. This is supremely true of the Word of God. We must read the Scriptures in their context. This means that we

must read the Scriptures in the light of the constant tradition of the Church, her preaching, her life of worship, her activity in the world.

The Scriptures are so much the Church's own that, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it is the life of the Church which provides the context in which we understand the Scriptures. The Scriptures, then, are as "alive" as the Church itself. ■



The Bible is beyond a doubt the most frequently translated book in history. St. Cyril and his brother, St. Methodius, translated the Scriptures into Slavonic.

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# THE FOUR GOSPELS: 4 x 1 = 1

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The type of cake a woman bakes depends on the ingredients she puts into it. This is obvious. The same is true of a book. A librarian classifies a book after examining what it contains — the ingredients. One glance at the table of contents of any book is enough to tell us what sort of book it is.

This gives us the clue as to how we should go about answering the question: What is a Gospel? If we remind ourselves of the contents, the ingredients which went to make up the Gospel, then we can begin to define the sort of book it is.

We have already examined the various stages in the formation of the Gospels. We need now only list them in order.

1. The preaching of the Apostles passed on by word of mouth.
2. Vivid memories of our Lord also passed on by word of mouth.
3. Possibly a written account of some incidents from Christ's life.
4. The reflections of the early Church and other material added by the evangelists.

Examine this list carefully and one point becomes immediately obvious. The evangelists did not simply sit down and compose a book out of their heads. Most of the material they used had already taken shape under the influence of the Apostles — and they were the *official* witnesses of our Lord's life. Right from the start, then, we see this is no ordinary book. How, then, can we best describe it?

Is it a history book? Yes and no. Much in the Gospel is historically

accurate, but it is, for example, impossible to construct an accurate timetable of the life of Christ from reading it.

Is it a biography? Any biography would surely give a description of what Christ looked like. It tells us a great deal about Jesus, but the absence of an accurate timetable of His life again leads us to answer yes and no.

So the New Testament is not strictly a history book, neither is it entirely a biography. How, then, can we possibly describe it? St. John is very helpful here. He tells us exactly why he wrote his Gospel.

"These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life through His Name" (John 20:30).

John wanted his account of the life of Christ to be more than just a list of facts. He wanted it to lead men to a deeper knowledge of Christ.

There are two ways of telling a story. You can tell the story in minute detail, omitting nothing. This provides your listener with a simple timetable of events. Or you can tell a story by simply picking out the most significant incidents. This way your listener not only knows the most important things that happened but can also be given an insight into the meaning of these events.

Compare a photograph and a portrait. A photograph tells you only what a person looks like. A portrait tells you a great deal about his character... what he is really like deep down. The

Gospel is not like a photograph of Christ; it is more like a portrait.

How, then, can we define a Gospel? We can say the Gospel is a portrait study of Christ. By putting before us the preaching of the Church about the public life, death and exaltation of our Lord, the Gospel gives us a true witness and account of His life. But something else — and we will have more to say about this. The Gospel is an inspired book. It is the word of God. It is God speaking to us.

To understand the Gospels it is important to realize that they were not primarily written for *us*! They were each written with a particular type of reader in mind. For this reason, each Gospel has its own theme, purpose and emphasis.

Let's look briefly at each of the four.

## THE GOSPEL OF ST. LUKE

Like the other Gospels, Luke's was intended primarily for Christians already familiar with the Gospel message but it also seeks to attract educated non-Christians. It was written in Greek and has an educated style. It emphasizes that Christ is the Savior of all men and stresses the compassion of Jesus for the poor and the outcast.

## THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW

This Gospel has been described as the greatest book ever written. It is certainly the most familiar and probably the most popular of the four Gospels. Written with a fine sense of order and balance, it presents Christ as a great

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teacher who fulfills the Old Testament prophecies: the promised Messiah who completes God's plan. It was written primarily for Jewish converts and, therefore, contains many references to the Old Testament. It was probably composed about 70 A.D. To get the flavor of this Gospel, read the Sermon on the Mount in Chapters five through seven.

### THE GOSPEL OF ST. MARK

There is an early Christian tradition that St. Mark was a follower of St. Peter in Rome. His Gospel was probably written there shortly before or after the death of Peter. It is thought that Mark's was the first of the Gospels to be written, probably

about 64-67 A.D.

The Gospel was written primarily for Roman converts who wanted a permanent record of the life of Christ as it had been taught to them. Because it was for Romans, Mark's Gospel contains many explanations of Jewish customs. It also explains the meaning of Aramaic words and expressions. The Old Testament is hardly ever quoted. It concentrates on Jesus as the Son of God rather than as the Savior promised in the Old Testament.

Mark's Gospel is noted for the miracles it records. It is more a Gospel of action than of words. It is the shortest of the four and can easily be read at one sitting.

### THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN

This Gospel of St. John shows a marked difference from the other three Gospels. All four evangelists select their material to suit their purpose, but this selection is most evident in John. The Gospel was written in Greek about 90 A.D. and bears the characteristics of an old man's reflections on past events, delving into their deeper meaning.

The purpose of this Gospel is "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God . . ." Although John's Gospel carefully places events in correct order, it would be a mistake to think of it as "straight reporting." With this Gospel more than the others, we should read between the lines.

## APOSTOLIC ACTION

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles was written by St. Luke toward the end of the first century. The book begins with an account of Christ's ascension and the election of Matthias to take the place of Judas as a member of the twelve apostles. Then follows the record of the events of the day of Pentecost when the promised Holy Spirit came upon the disciples of Christ, empowering them to preach the gospel of new life in the resurrected Savior to the people in Jerusalem.

The first chapters of the book tell the story of the first days of the Church in Jerusalem and provide us with a vivid picture of the primitive Christian community being built up through the work of the apostles. It tells of the people being baptized and endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit through repentance and faith in Christ, and continuing steadfast in their devotion "to the

Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers." (2:42) Accounts of early missionary work, especially that of Saints Paul and Barnabas, follow.

## DEAR ST. PAUL

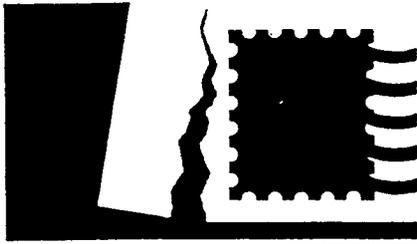
Most of St. Paul's writings were letters. When he wrote them, he had no idea that they would be kept for future generations. When we receive a letter from a friend whom we haven't seen for a while, we might pass it around so that others can share in the news. The Church in a similar way took Paul's letters after his death and passed them around, so that everyone could share in

the "Good News."

Even during his lifetime, Paul's letters enjoyed a wide readership. To the Christians of Thessalonika Paul ordered "this letter is to be read to all the brothers." And today to his brothers and sisters in Christ, his letters retain that personal touch. We can read and enjoy them as we would the letters of a close friend. In his Epistles, St. Paul still encourages and rebukes as he did two thousand years ago.

If Paul had realized, however, that his letters were to be read for all time, he might have polished up his Greek grammar and taken more trouble to make his thought a little clearer! As it was, he simply poured out his heart in a torrent of words which went straight to the hearts of his readers.

Paul's letters were usually written to the Churches he visited. He knew their loyalty and devotion. He knew their hardships and their failings. Paul always wrote in response to these.



# 1ST CENTURY MAILBAG

In addition to the four gospel accounts and the Acts of the Apostles, the New Testament contains 21 epistles. Originally letters to various local churches, they contain many practical guidelines for Christian living, and are often referred to as *teaching* or *didactic* books. The following synopsis of each epistle follows their present arrangement within the New Testament, as it is nearly impossible to ascertain the exact dates or order in which they were written.

## THE EPISTLE OF THE ROMANS

Written by Paul, apparently from Corinth, between 54 and 58 A.D., the Epistle to the Romans is his longest, most important, and most influential letter. Its subject is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (1:16).

## THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

Written from Ephesus about two or three years before Romans, it is mainly concerned with doctrinal and moral problems which were troubling the new Christians in Corinth.

## THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

This letter was written by Paul, not long after the first. Meanwhile, however, he seems to have visited the Corinthians' community and later sent a second letter (now lost) which was very severe. This letter is in response to the news of a change of heart on the part of the Corinthians. It is a very precious source of information about St. Paul's

character and his missionary work.

## THE EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS

In this letter, Paul settled once and for all, with a resounding "no," the question of whether gentiles must become Jews before they can become Christians. The most intensely personal of Paul's letters, it was written about the year 55.

## THE EPISTLE TO EPHESIANS

Thought by many modern authorities, for a number of reasons, to be a "circular" letter, copies of which were addressed to various churches, this letter contains the most sublime treatment of the Church, the body of Christ, in the New Testament. Many now question whether in fact Paul wrote it. If he indeed did write it, he did so at about the same time as Colossians (early 60's).

## THE EPISTLE TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Addressed to the Christians of Philippi in Macedonia, especially dear to Paul as the "first fruits" of Christianity in Europe, it is the most affectionate of his letters. It was most probably written in Rome, where Paul was in prison between about 61 and 63. The letter is redolent of Paul's joy and happiness in Christ, even though he was a prisoner possibly facing a death sentence.

## THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

A kind of companion piece to

Ephesians, it is more concerned with Christ Himself, whereas Ephesians is concerned with the meaning and nature of the Church, which Paul calls the "body of Christ." It may very well have been written at the same time and under the same circumstances as Philippians.

## THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS

Probably the oldest writing in the New Testament, this epistle was written from Corinth, apparently early in the '50's. It is our main source of information regarding Paul's thinking about the Second Coming of Christ.

## THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE THESSALONIANS

According to a minority of present-day scholars, this is perhaps not the work of Paul. In any case, it continues the discussion of some of the questions raised in 1 Thessalonians and was probably written after that letter.

## THE FIRST AND SECOND EPISTLES TO TIMOTHY AND THE EPISTLE TO TITUS

These are collectively known as the "pastoral" epistles because they are largely concerned with the pastoral ministry in the Church. They contain very precious information regarding the structural organization of the early Church. For a number of reasons, many scholars today are unwilling to include them among the authentic writings of Paul, at least in their present form. If they are Paul's, they must have been written toward the end of his life (the middle 60's). If they are not his, then they have been written much later than 67, the year traditionally regarded as the year of Paul's martyrdom.

## THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Not really a letter at all, but a discourse or exhortatory treatise on the superiority of Christ, it is impossible to determine with certainty just who the "Hebrews" were who are addressed. Many authorities believe, on good grounds, that it must have been written before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70.

## THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

The first, and in some respects, the most important of the seven so-called "catholic" or "general" epistles, the individuals or groups addressed are not clearly identified. This epistle is really a sermon, highly moral in tone, in the form of a letter. Exactly who wrote it and when is not known. Just about every James mentioned in the New Testament has at one time or another been

credited with it.

## THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON

The only certain example of a personal letter in the correspondence of Paul, this epistle has been called a "masterpiece of the letter writer's art" largely because of the exquisite tact with which the writer deals with the matter of Philemon's escaped slave Onesimus. It was probably sent along with the letter to the Colossians.

## THE FIRST EPISTLE OF PETER

This appears to be a message of encouragement and hope to persecuted Christians in Asia Minor. Some authorities are reluctant to admit Peter as its author, but it may be that he worked it out and then entrusted its actual composition to Silvanus (5:12) who had a better com-

mand of the Greek language. It seems to have been written from Rome in about the year 64.

## THE SECOND EPISTLE OF PETER

Some claim that this is an authentic writing by Peter himself, while others date this letter to the early part of the second century. It has two purposes: to encourage faith in the Second Coming of Christ and to warn against false teachers.

# A MOST REVEALING BOOK

The book of Revelation, also called the Apocalypse, brings the New Testament and the whole Bible to a close. Traditionally ascribed to John, it is written in apocalyptic style, utilizing a variety of images and symbols often misunderstood and misinterpreted today. When all is said and done, however, its message can be summed up in the one word *hope*. Written for the benefit of the early Christians who were already suffering intense persecution for their faith, Revelation stresses the glories that await those who remain faithful to Christ as Lord, God and Savior. It ends with the glorious prayer of the early Church, "Come, Lord Jesus!" Having gone through various stages of composition which some feel involved the work of a number of hands, it reached its final form not long before the end of the first century.



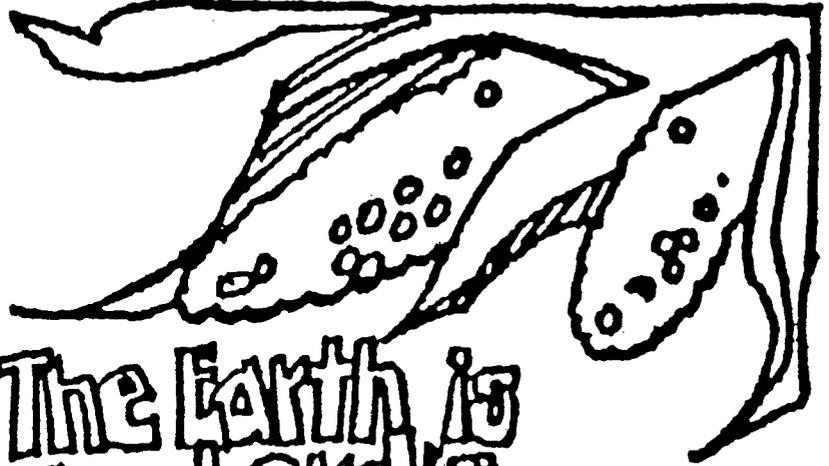
St. John on  
the Island of  
Patmos.

## THE THREE EPISTLES OF JOHN

These three short epistles are most likely from the same hand as that which produced the Gospel of John. The first, especially, can appropriately serve either as an introduction or a postscript to that gospel. All three were probably written at about the same time as the Gospel of John.

## THE EPISTLE OF JUDE

Written as a warning against false teachers, it may very well be that, as tradition holds, Jude, the "brother of the Lord," was its author, but there is no reason to necessarily identify this Jude with the Apostle of the same name. It is not possible to determine to whom it was addressed or when or where it was written. ■



The Earth is  
The Lord's  
and the Fullness  
Thereof

## HUNGRYMIND

For Orthodox Christians, the New Testament is an indispensable source of our faith. How does St. Paul describe the value of the written word in the Holy Scriptures in 2 Timothy 3:14-17? What can we learn from the Scriptures?

Why were the four Gospels written? Why do they differ in perspective?

How can their development be outlined?

What does the word "gospel" mean? What is the meaning of the word, "epistle"? How is the Word of God described in the following passages: Psalm 33:4-9; Psalm 119:81-105; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Matthew 8:16. What information do we receive in reading Hebrews 1:1-3; 1 John 1:1-2, 5; Colossians 1:16-17.

Why were the Epistles written? How might one describe an Epistle?

What is the "Canon" of Scriptures? How was the contents of the New Testament established? When? By whom?

What does it mean when we say that the Gospels are more than just historical accounts of the life of Christ? What is their purpose?

Read John 20:30-31; 21:24-25. What two important criteria are established for the writing of the Gospel?

Why are the Epistles known as *didactic* books of the New Testament? How do they differ in content and purpose from the Gospels?

In what way does the Book of Revelations differ from the rest of the New Testament? In what style is it written? Sum up the main theme of this book.

Outline the main concepts found in the Acts of the Apostles. Who wrote this book? Would it be correct to say that it is a historical book?

The four Gospels give us important information concerning the person and nature of Jesus Christ. Look up the following passages, and summarize the importance of each.

John 14:9

Matthew 11:27

John 5:20

Matthew 24:30

John 14:24

John 20:17

Matthew 3:17; 17:5

John 1:1-14

Matthew 11:25-27

John 8:54-57

John 16:26-28; 17:5

John 16:13-15; 17:9

The word "gospel" literally means the "good news" that Christ has fulfilled the Old Testament promises of His coming. Jesus Himself used the term "to preach the gospel" and the early Church adopted these words to describe the saving message of the Old Testament as we find it in the message of Christ and in His own person. Look up the following passages, and note the importance of the Gospel expressed in each.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Ephesians 6:10-12

Romans 8:17

2 Corinthians 4:10

Ephesians 3:13

1 Peter 1:13

Ephesians 6:14

Matthew 10:18; 24:14

Mark 13:9

Acts 1:8; 3:15

Matthew 28:16-20

John 21:1-23

Luke 24:47

Acts 1:8