

Manual for Presenting The *New* Catholic Vision

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CREATION STORY

GROUP PREPARATION

Ideally, participants should prepare for the session by

- reading the four-page presentation,
- completing the two sentences (page 1),
- thinking about the Old Wise One's question (page 2),
- composing a prayer to God about the feelings they had after doing the Reflect exercise of "Group interaction" (page 3).

GROUP MEDITATION

The Dancer (page 1)

- Light a candle.
- Read aloud, slowly and prayerfully, the photo-caption meditation entitled "The Dancer."
- Pause ten seconds. Then read the following:

A reading from the Book of Psalms:

O LORD, my God, how great you are!

You are clothed with majesty and glory;

you cover yourself with light.

*You have spread out the heavens like a tent
and built your home on the waters above. . . .*

*From the sky you send rain on the hills,
and the earth is filled with your blessings. . . .*

LORD, you have made so many things!

How wisely you made them all!

The earth is filled with your creatures. . . .

Praise the LORD, my soul!

Praise the LORD! Psalm 104:1-2, 13, 24, 35

- Pause one minute for all to reflect in silence.

GROUP SHARING

Complete these two sentences (page 1)

Break participants into groups of six and have the members of each group share how they completed the two sentences that introduce the chapter. (If the overall group is small, or if it seems advisable, the sharing may take place without breaking into smaller groups.)

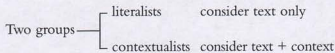
GROUP PRESENTATION

THE SURPRISE (pages 1-2)

Clarence Darrow took many unpopular cases like the Scopes defense. For example, he defended Loeb and Leopold, the two University of Chicago students who kidnapped and murdered a schoolboy. He also represented the Pennsylvania coal miners in their battle against mine owners for better working conditions. Scopes was found guilty of teaching the theory of evolution. He was fined one hundred dollars.

Bible readers fall into two groups (page 2)

Stress the difference between the way that literalists (fundamentalists) and contextualists interpret the Bible.



Church of God members insist that the word *day* must be interpreted to mean a period of twenty-four hours. Using biblical chronologies, they believe creation took place about A.D. 4000. When asked how they squared this with the fact that scientists have found bones that have been scientifically proven to be millions of years old, one literalist reader is reported to have said, "God deliberately buried those bones to see if we would believe them or the Bible."

Contextual interpreters consider both the text and the context (historical, cultural, and literary). A modern example of how the context in which something is spoken can affect the meaning of what is spoken is CB radio jargon. Truck drivers who operate CB radios have a language all their own. For instance, they say, "There's a bear in the air." This is merely their way of saying that a police helicopter is clocking traffic and motorists should beware. Thus, the context of an expression is sometimes crucial to its meaning. You might share other CB jargon with the group.

Smokey's got ears	police car with CB
nap trap	motel
Willy Weaver	drunk driver
camera	police radar unit
motion lotion	gasoline
Tijuana taxi	police car with lights
pregnant roller skate	Volkswagen
Texas Chevy	Cadillac

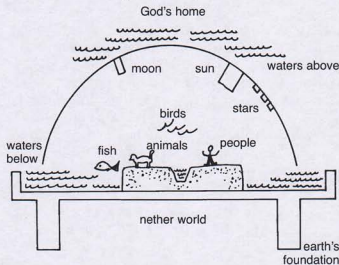
Obviously, the context changes the literal meaning of all these terms. Similarly, the context of biblical terms and narratives affects their literal meaning.

How can we interpret the biblical portrait of creation? (page 2)

After reading the excerpt from the second day of the creation, stop and ask the group: Can you explain what is being referred to by the statement "God made a dome, and it separated the water under it from the water above it"?

Ancient peoples thought water existed in two different places: below the sky (sea) and above the sky (rainfall). A great shell-like dome was thought to hold back the water above (which God occasionally let fall through tiny slits as rain) from the water below. Psalm 104:2-3, 5 reflects this view. It says of God:

You have spread out the heavens like a tent and built your home on the waters above. . . . You have set the earth firmly on its foundations.



Hebrews visualized the universe as a three-decker universe: the world of the dead (nether world), the world of the living (our world), and the world of God (God's home).

The first creation story follows a poetic pattern/There is only one God/God planned creation/God created everything good/God made the Sabbath holy (pages 3-4)

The material in these sections is spelled out in detail in the chapter text and is fairly self-explanatory.

The second creation story complements the first one (page 4)

Again, the material in this section is spelled out in detail and is fairly self-explanatory.

Our oldest copies of biblical manuscripts are the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were discovered between 1947 and 1956. One day in 1947, while searching in a cave for a lost goat, a young Arab found an old manuscript in a jar. His discovery set off a search of other caves in the area. Over the next nine years, eleven caves yielded over eight hundred ancient scrolls (most in fragmentary form). About two hundred were biblical scrolls.

Using a Geiger counter, scientists dated some of the scrolls back to over two hundred years before the time of Jesus. Almost every book of the Hebrew Scriptures was represented. Experts think the scrolls were hidden by Essenes (Jewish "monks") living in a "monastery" at Qumran (northern tip of the Dead Sea) to protect the scrolls from invading Roman armies around 70 B.C. There the scrolls stayed until modern times. Interestingly, had they been discovered earlier, many of the scrolls would have been unreadable. Modern techniques, like infrared photography, have made them readable.

GROUP INTERACTION (page 3)

Have participants share in groups as described under "Group Sharing."

Reflect

A good way to handle this meditation exercise is to have participants do it before the session and write out a prayer to God that expresses the feelings they had as a result of their meditation. The prayers (a paragraph or two in length) can then be read and discussed in the group setting.

Share

- "Every common bush afire with God" is a reference to the burning bush where Moses encountered God in the desert.
- The "frozen echo of the silent voice of God" refers to the creation story, which portrays God as saying, "Let there be light"—and light appeared," and so on.
- The universe is incomprehensible in size.

Read

These passages may be read aloud in the group and then discussed.

Do you know why? (page 2)

Atheists walk among the beauties of nature without making face-to-face contact with God because this is the one thing they carefully avoid—just as thieves go out of their way to avoid face-to-face contact with a police officer.

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DE-CREATION STORY

GROUP PREPARATION

Ideally, participants should prepare for the session as described previously.

GROUP MEDITATION

Crushed spirit (page 1)

- Light a candle.
- Read aloud, slowly and prayerfully, the photo-caption meditation entitled "Crushed spirit."
- Pause ten seconds. Then read the following:

A reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans:
*I do not understand what I do;
 for I don't do what I would like to do,
 but instead I do what I hate. . . .
 My inner being delights in the law of God.
 But I see a different law at work in my body—
 a law that fights against the law
 which my mind approves of. . . .
 What an unhappy man I am!
 Who will rescue me from this body
 that is taking me to death?
 Thanks be to God, who does this
 through our Lord Jesus Christ!* Romans 7:15, 22–25

- Pause one minute for all to reflect in silence.

GROUP SHARING

Complete these two sentences (page 1)

Have participants share in groups as described previously.

GROUP PRESENTATION

THE EARTH WAS SILENT (pages 1–2)

- It costs New York State \$100,000 each holiday weekend to clean up 30,000 bushels of rubbish that picnickers and motorists leave behind.
- Breathing the polluted air of some cities is equal to smoking two packs of cigarettes daily.
- Years ago, Cleveland's Cuyahoga River used to catch fire periodically from chemicals and oil slicks.

- Chemically treated sewage and fertilizer pour into streams and lakes, producing algae that use more oxygen than they replace. This situation, which once plagued Lake Erie, results in eutrophication, destroying fish.

Thanks to environmentalists, pollution (physical de-creation) is being addressed. Unless we continue to address it, it will destroy our planet.

Many people are beginning to realize that we must address spiritual de-creation (sin) with the same rigor with which we are finally addressing physical de-creation. Unless we continue to do this, sin will destroy us.

De-creation is the destruction of God's creation (page 2)

At a meeting of bishops in 1984, Pope John Paul II said, "As a personal act, sin has its first and most important consequences in the sinner himself." Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (made into a film) dramatizes the pope's point.

In Wilde's novel, Dorian is a young man of extraordinary talent and charm. When Dorian sees a painting that an artist made of him, he exclaims, "I'd give my soul if I could remain young and the painting grow old." This happens.

Soon Dorian gets involved in a life of sin. He is astounded how each sin marks (ever so slightly) the face in the painting. Meanwhile his own face remains beautiful. In time the painting becomes so ugly that Dorian locks it in an attic. Periodically, he checks it and is appalled at what he sees.

All the while, Dorian continues to charm people with his youthful, handsome appearance. Years pass and the painting grows so ugly that Dorian can no longer stand it. One day he plunges a knife into the heart of the painting. There is a cry and a crash. Dorian's servants come running. On the wall hangs the painting of a beautiful Dorian. On the floor lies a loathsome old man with a knife in his heart. Only when the servants examine a ring on the finger of the man do they realize it is Dorian.

The story of Dorian Gray is an attempt to dramatize the destructive effect that personal sin has on the sinner. In his 1984 meeting the pope went on to note that our personal sins affect other people, saying:

Each individual's sin in some way affects others. . . .
There is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one . . . that exclusively concerns the person committing it. . . .
Every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family.

The pope continued, saying:

[Because of the Communion of Saints,]
"every soul that rises above itself, raises the world."
To this law of ascent
there unfortunately corresponds the law of descent.
Consequently, one can speak of a communion of sin,
whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin
drags down with itself the Church and,
in some way, the whole world.

Sin falls into two categories/

Personal sin concerns individuals/

Social sin involves groups (pages 2-3)

The question of sin will be treated in more detail in chapter 22. For our purposes now, the stress is on personal and social sin. Even purely personal sin has a social impact. For example, a father cannot sin without that sin affecting his family.

Probably most people sin by omission rather than by commission. The Last Judgment scene (Matthew 25) highlights sins of omission. For example, "I was hungry but you would not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink" (Matthew 25:42).

Evil raises a question/

Sin changes the human situation profoundly (pages 3-4)

We are born with a "sin-prone" nature. This means that once we are born into the world, it is just a matter of time before its sinfulness touches us. Without Christ we are doomed, just as the concentration camp victims were. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (made into a movie) dramatizes this fact.

The novel concerns a group of fourteen-year-old British schoolboys marooned on a deserted island during World War II. A plane evacuating them from England crash-lands in the sea. The pilot and copilot die, but the boys survive.

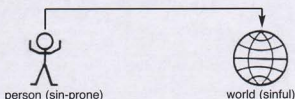
Gradually, without the support structures of adult society, the boys revert to killing one another. Golding ends his novel with an officer on a British cruiser spotting the boys and arriving in time to keep the others from executing the only boy who has not yet turned savage. Golding concludes:

*The officer having interrupted a manhunt
prepares to take the children off the island in a cruiser
which will presently be hunting its enemy
in the same implacable way.
And who will rescue the adult and the cruiser?*

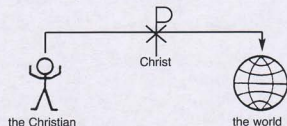
We are doomed / A ray of hope shines forth (page 4)

The two diagrams below clarify what we mean by original sin and how Christ saves us from its effects.

Place sin-prone people in the sinful world and we are doomed to become like it.



Only Jesus Christ can save us. This is what we mean by saying that Jesus is our savior. He saves us from our doomed situation. He gives us the life and power to overcome it.



GROUP INTERACTION (page 3)

Have participants share in groups as described previously.

Reflect

Handle this exercise as described previously.

Share

- *Fifty Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth* notes that if we recycled our Sunday papers, we would save half a million trees a week. If we carried one passenger to and from work instead of driving alone, we would save half a million gallons of gas a day. Finally, people in the U.S. throw away 2.5 million plastic bottles an hour. Only a tiny percentage of these is recycled.
- The Dorian Gray story dramatizes Franklin's point.
- For one thing, loyalty to our planet is not as evident and measurable as loyalty to a club or a company. Therefore, we tend to ignore our planet.

Read

These passages may be read aloud in the group and then discussed.

Do you understand why? (page 2)

The Old Wise One's point touches on Dr. Menninger's point about refusing to admit sin. Some link the refusal to admit sin with the "sin against the Holy Spirit." People who refuse to admit any guilt refuse to seek or accept God's forgiveness.

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RE-CREATION STORY

GROUP PREPARATION

Ideally, participants should prepare for the session as described previously.

GROUP MEDITATION

Salvation symbolized (page 1)

- Light a candle.
- Read aloud, slowly and prayerfully, the photo-caption meditation entitled "Salvation symbolized."
- Pause ten seconds. Then read the following:

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke:

*[Jesus told Peter and his companions
to lower the nets of their boat for a catch.*

*Peter protested that they had fished all night
and had caught nothing. Then he added,]*

"But if you say so, I will let down the nets."

They let them down

*and caught such a large number of fish
that the nets were about to catch. . . .*

*[Peter] and the others with him were all amazed
at the large number of fish they caught. . . .*

*Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid;
from now on you will be catching people."*

They pulled the boats up on the beach,

left everything, and followed Jesus. Luke 5:5-6, 9-11

- Pause one minute for all to reflect in silence.

GROUP SHARING

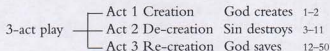
Complete these two sentences (page 1)

Have participants share in groups as described previously.

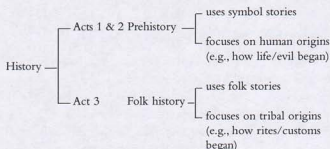
GROUP PRESENTATION

GOD'S PLAN! (page 1)

The following diagrams sum up the key ideas in this Old Testament overview. Depending on your teaching situation, you might reproduce the diagrams on an overhead projector or even on a photocopy handout.

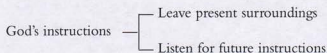


God sets the stage for the re-creation of the world (page 1)



God covenants with Abram (page 2)

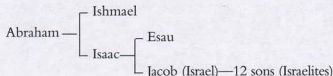
Abram's encounter with God resulted in God instructing Abram to do two things.



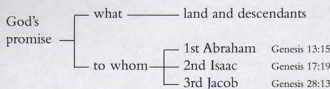
Why did God instruct Abram to leave his surroundings? Perhaps the "seed of faith" that God planted in Abram's and Sarai's hearts was too fragile to grow in their old surroundings. God wanted to transplant them into better soil—away from pagan ways and temptations.

The "leave/listen" pattern is a familiar one. Someone says, "I must get away [leave] to sort things out [listen]." A retreat is a good example of the "leave/listen" pattern.

The following family tree sprouted from Abraham and Sarah, giving rise to the twelve tribes of Israel (Israelites).



God's encounters with Abraham ended with God promising Abraham land and descendants. That promise was handed on progressively from Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob.



God covenants with Israel (page 2)

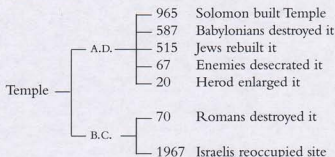
Commenting on God's covenant with Israel, Jewish writer Will Herberg says in his book *Jewish Existence and Survival*:

Israel is not a "natural" nation; it is, indeed, not a nation at all like the nations of the world. It is a supernatural community, called into being . . . by God's special act of covenant, first with Abraham . . . [then] with Israel collectively. . . . Apart from the covenant, Israel is as nothing.

God covenants with David (pages 2–3)

God's promise to David ("I will make your kingdom last forever") gave the covenant a new focus. At Mount Sinai it had been set up in a general way between God and the people. Now it was linked in a specific way to Israel's kings. David and his successors are described as God's "anointed ones." Recall that kings were anointed (1 Samuel 10:1) and that the word *messiah* means "the anointed one."

Solomon's greatest achievement was completing his father's dream and building the magnificent Temple of Jerusalem. The history of the Temple may be summarized as follows:



Upon Solomon's death, the nation split. This split caused all kinds of problems and sparked the era of the prophets. For the most part, prophets and kings walked along together in the Bible. They were like two rails of a train track. Where you see one, you usually see the other. The reason for this is that part of the prophet's job was to advise and correct the king (2 Samuel 7:2–17, 11:1–12:15).

The prophets fall into two categories: nonwriting prophets (for example, Elijah and Elisha) and writing prophets (whose words are recorded in books bearing their name). The writing prophets may be divided into four *major* prophets (long books) and twelve *minor* prophets (short books). The major writing prophets are

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Among the minor prophets are Hosea, Amos, and Jonah.

God's people grow unfaithful and are led into exile (pages 3–4)

In spite of the warnings of the prophets, God's people did not reform. Eventually the Babylonians came and destroyed the Temple and the city, leading the people into exile in Babylon. Two important developments took place during Judah's exile in Babylon.

First, *the synagogue was born*. With the Temple in ruins miles away, the people kept their faith alive by gathering each Sabbath to ponder God's word. These meetings gave rise to a new worship place, known as the synagogue. It was primarily a *place of instruction* in God's word. Thus it contrasted with the Temple, which was primarily a *place of sacrifice* to God.

Second, *the Scriptures were born*. During the exile, scribes began to record God's word. Prior to the exile, much of it was passed on orally. Now it was written down on papyrus (paper-like) sheets. Later, scribes edited these into books.

God's people return home/ God's people await the Messiah (page 4)

The text is detailed and fairly clear on both of these points.

GROUP INTERACTION (page 3)

Have participants share in groups as described previously.

Reflect

Handle this exercise as described previously.

Share

- You may find it advisable to modify this exercise, depending on a variety of local circumstances. One way you might adapt is to expand the exercise. Have the participants write out, first, one thing that they think is highly commendable about the parish and, second, one thing that might improve the parish.
- This exercise should make excellent sharing.

Read

These passages may be read aloud in the group and then discussed.

Can you explain why? (page 2)

The Old Wise One's point is that there is so much good in each one of us in spite of our shortcomings and sins. The purpose of the sacrament of Reconciliation might be mentioned in connection with the Old Wise One's comments.

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COMING OF JESUS

GROUP PREPARATION

Ideally, participants should prepare for the session as described previously.

GROUP MEDITATION

Sunrise (page 1)

- Light a candle.
- Read aloud, slowly and prayerfully, the photo-caption meditation entitled "Sunrise."
- Pause ten seconds. Then read the following:

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew:

[One day Jesus] asked his disciples,

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

"Some say John the Baptist," they answered.

"Others say Elijah. . ."

"What about you?" he asked them.

"Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered,

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

"Good for you, Simon son of John!" answered Jesus.

"For this truth did not come to you

from any human being,

but it was given to you directly

by my Father in heaven." Matthew 16:13-17

- Pause one minute for all to reflect in silence.

GROUP SHARING

Complete these two sentences (page 1)

Have participants share in groups as described previously.

GROUP PRESENTATION

STAR OF LIGHT (page 1)

Nathaniel Hawthorne was dead. On his desk lay the outline of an unfinished play about a person who would never appear on stage. Everyone talks about the person; everyone dreams about meeting the person. But the person never appears. The Old Testament is like that. It centers around a person who never appears: the Messiah. At this point we pick up the New Testament

and turn to the Gospels. Like much of the Old Testament, the Gospels developed gradually by stages.

The first stage was the *life* stage, which began with Jesus' birth and ended with his ascension. The second stage was the *oral* stage, which began on Pentecost when Peter started preaching to the crowds. The third stage was the *written* stage, which began when the evangelists set out to record it. John alludes to these three stages in his First Letter:

What we have seen and heard [life stage]

we announce to you [oral stage]. . .

We write this [written stage]

in order that our joy may be complete. 1 John 1:3-4

A way to illustrate the three stages is the following: The *ocean floor* is littered with seashells. Over time, some of these shells wash onto the *beach*. Then one day an artist picks up the best ones and shapes them into a lovely *vase*.

The *floor shells* are like the *life* stage (what Jesus said and did); the *beach shells* are like the *oral* stage (what the apostles chose from Jesus' life and preached); the *vase shells* are like the *written* stage (what the evangelists chose from the apostle's preaching and recorded). And so we have

- the life stage what Jesus actually said and did,
- the oral stage what the apostles preached,
- the written stage what the evangelists recorded.

A TV director was planning a series called *New York: A Tourist's View*. He decided to present the city through the eyes of four tourists as they approached it for the first time: by rail (train), by road (car), by water (ship), by air (plane). Thus TV viewers would get four different views of New York. As a result, their appreciation of the city would be enhanced. We have something like this when it comes to Jesus. The Gospels approach him through the eyes of four different evangelists, each writing at a different time, a different place, and for a different audience. Experts do not agree totally on the times, places, and audiences, but this outline is probable:

	Time	Place	Primary Audience
Mark	70-	Rome	Persecuted Romans
Matthew	70+	Syria	Converted Jews
Luke	70+	Greece	Lower-class Greeks
John	90+	Ephesus	All Christians

Jesus is born/Jesus' birth previews Jesus' mission (pages 1-2)

Only two of the four evangelists chose to begin their Gospels with Jesus' birth: Luke and Matthew. Luke gives us the familiar Christmas description, with the angels appearing to the shepherds in the field. Matthew focuses more on the visit of the Magi. Both ran into problems in choosing to begin with Jesus' birth. Neither of them was familiar with Jesus' infancy.

And so Luke and Matthew turned to three sources: *history* (remembered events, especially events that Mary's family remembered), *prophecy* (Old Testament prophecies), and *inspiration* (Holy Spirit's guidance). As a result, infancy stories of Jesus might be compared to tapestries woven from three different threads (history, prophecy, and inspiration). These are so artistically interwoven that it is hard to say where one begins and the other ends. Luke's birth narrative previews three things, especially, about Jesus:

- birth word Jesus = Messiah,
- birth place manger = poverty preview,
- birth time lambing season = mission preview.

The Magi visit previews future reaction to Jesus (pages 2-3)

This brings us to Matthew's birth focus: the Magi visit.

History records the fact of the Magi: advisors to kings. Prophecy refers to Bethlehem, the star, and gifts. Inspiration mentions gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Tradition interprets the gifts of the Magi symbolically:

- gold kingship or messianic nature,
- frankincense divine nature,
- myrrh human nature.

Jesus is presented in the Temple (page 3)

This treatment is straightforward in the text. Simeon's fourfold prophecy may be highlighted. Jesus will be

- a light to the Gentiles,
- glory to Israel,
- a sign to be opposed,
- a sword to his mother.

Jesus is baptized by John/A new era dawns/ A new creation begins/A new Adam appears (pages 3-4)

Again, the treatment is detailed and straightforward. Stress the threefold imagery and its significance:

- new era heavens opened,
- new creation dove descended,
- new Adam voice spoke.

Jesus is tempted by the devil (page 4)

The exact nature of Jesus' temptations is often discussed. For example, how did the devil show himself to Jesus in a physical way? Medieval artists depicted the devil in a starkly literal way, often showing him in red tights and a grotesque humanoid body. Modern artists prefer a more symbolic approach. A British TV team portrayed the devil by a shadow falling across the sand.

Scholars generally agree that the number *forty* is used symbolically. It designates an unspecified but significant lapse of time between two key periods. Here are some examples: flood (Genesis 7:4), Exodus sojourn (Exodus 16:35), Moses on mountain (Exodus 34:28), Elijah's journey (1 Kings 19:8), Jesus in desert (Luke 4:2), appearance of risen Jesus (Act 1:3).

Stress the threefold preview that is set forth by Jesus' temptations:

- identity human (tempted) and divine (stood firm),
- mission new Adam and new Israel,
- lifestyle will suffer, serve, destroy evil.

GROUP INTERACTION (page 3)

Have participants share in groups as described previously.

Reflect

Handle this exercise as described previously.

Share

- The group may discuss the seven "works" of Christmas and what they might do, concretely, about each.
- The nativity set contains the most potent dynamite imaginable. If we ever grasp the full significance of it, the world will never be the same.

Read

These passages may be read aloud in the group and then discussed.

Do you know? (page 2)

The Old Wise One's point is that Jesus gave us himself on Christmas. And that is what he wants from us: the gift of ourselves. How do we give ourselves? By giving Jesus our will. It is really the only gift we can give. (Recall the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done.")

Spike (page 4)

Spike's reference is to Jesus "lost again" in the Temple.

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MINISTRY OF JESUS

GROUP PREPARATION

Ideally, participants should prepare for the session as described previously.

GROUP MEDITATION

Kingdom of God (page 1)

- Light a candle.
- Read aloud, slowly and prayerfully, the photo-caption meditation entitled "Kingdom of God."
- Pause ten seconds. Then read the following:

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke:
*One day Jesus got into a boat with his disciples
 and said to them,*

*"Let us go across to the other side of the lake."
 So they started out.*

*As they were sailing, Jesus fell asleep.
 Suddenly a strong wind blew down on the lake,
 and the boat began to fill with water,
 so that they were all in great danger.*

*The disciples went to Jesus and woke him up,
 saying, "Master, Master! We are about to die!"*

*Jesus got up and gave an order to the wind
 and to the stormy water;
 they quieted down, and there was a great calm.
 Then he said to the disciples, "Where is your faith?"*

*But they were amazed and afraid,
 and said to one another, "Who is this man?
 He gives orders to the winds and waves,
 and they obey him!"* Luke 8:22-25

- Pause one minute for all to reflect in silence.

GROUP SHARING

Complete these two sentences (page 1)

Have participants share in groups as described previously.

GROUP PRESENTATION

DRAMATIC SIGNS (page 1)

Years ago an American journalist showed Asian peasants a photograph of the skyline of New York City. They

refused to believe such a place existed. If something is so contrary to our everyday experience that we can't even imagine it, we tend not to believe it.

One reason why people do not believe in miracles is that miracles are so contrary to modern human experience. We have been conditioned by science to think that everything can eventually be explained. By definition we tend to rule out the possibility of the *mysterious* and the *miraculous*. Referring to this tendency, David Stanley and Raymond Brown say:

To start with the presupposition that miracles are impossible . . . is to forget the unique character of the divine intervention in history of Jesus. The whole Gospel conviction is that the kingdom (or dominion) of God was making its presence felt in an extraordinary way in the ministry of Jesus; and any attempt to set boundaries as to what was possible at this unique moment on the basis of our ordinary experience is very risky.

"Aspects of New Testament Thought," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*

The cover of *Time* magazine (April 10, 1995) carried a painting of Jesus. Across it was this sentence: "Can We Still Believe in Miracles?" Here are two quotes from the article that you may wish to have the group react to:

- *For the truly faithful, no miracle is necessary; for those who must doubt, no miracle is sufficient.*
- *When reports spread of statues weeping or crosses bleeding . . . the [Catholic] church is often slow to respond, fearful that the search for a sign will distract from the hard work of faith.*

People in biblical times responded to Jesus' miracles much as people do today. Some believed (John 7:31); some doubted (Mark 6:3); some didn't know what to think (Luke 9:7).

Miracles announce the arrival of the Messiah (pages 1-2)

After the astronauts' flight to the moon that ended with Neil Armstrong's walking on the moon, astronaut Ed Aldrin wrote in *Life* magazine:

It is difficult for me to articulate my thoughts about the significance of this flight. On the surface it was three people on a voyage, but it was more than that. . . . It is my hope that people will keep this whole event in their minds and see beyond minor details and technical achievements to a deeper meaning behind it all.

This brings us to the most important question about Jesus' miracles: What is the *deeper meaning* behind them?

Jesus' miracles fulfilled the signs foretold by Isaiah: healing the blind (Matthew 9:27–30), the deaf (Mark 7:31–37), the lame (Luke 5:18–26), the dumb (Matthew 9:32–33).

***Miracles also announce the arrival of God's kingdom/
Miracles invite people to respond to God's kingdom***
(page 2)

Father Malachi's Miracle by Bruce Marshall has Malachi tell a friend, "One spectacular miracle, and we will prove to the world . . . that we have the Light and the Truth." The next night the priest kneels in deep prayer. The miracle takes place, but it has just the opposite effect. The crushing blow comes when a female vocalist sings a sultry ballad about the miracle. She ends by raffling off the silk stockings she was wearing during the famous flight. A much wiser Father Malachi realizes that it was foolish to ever think that a miracle was all that was needed to bring people to belief.

Jesus' miracles still announce God's kingdom and invite people to respond to it. Unfortunately, many people still close their eyes and their ears to Jesus' miracles. We might compare them to early map makers who refused to put Columbus's discovery on their maps. They are like members of the Flat Earth Society who, until the late 1960s, refused to admit the earth is round.

Jesus uses parables to teach about God's kingdom (pages 2–3)

God's kingdom was so far beyond people's everyday experience that Jesus could not speak about it directly. A fanciful illustration will help clarify this point.

One day a fish wanders off from fish land. He stumbles upon submarines, divers, and underwater cameras invading the sea world. Excited and alarmed, the dumb-founded fish returns to fish land to spread the news about these weird invaders from outer water. The poor fish is ridiculed by the local experts, who say, "But there can't be intelligent life in outer water! Too much oxygen! Not enough water! And the light would kill them! You were simply hallucinating."

Jesus faced a similar situation when it came to teaching people about God's kingdom. Parables were ideal for teaching about this subject. They helped people stretch their minds gradually and embrace ideas that were bigger than those they were used to.

***People respond differently to Jesus' teaching/
"Path"/"Rock"/"Thorn"/"Soil people" . . .*** (pages 3–4)

The following diagram spells out the plot and point of Jesus' parable of the sower.

Parable's Plot	Comparison	Parable's Point
Seed's fruitfulness depends on seedbed's openness	Seed (God's word) to seedbed (heart)	Word's fruitfulness depends on heart's openness

The following diagram spells out the imagery of Jesus' parable of the sower and its application to life.

Four Types of Hearts	Fate of Word	Explanation of Fate of Word
Path people	Stolen	Don't heed word (ignore)
Rock people	Withers	Heed and fall (temptation)
Thorn people	Chokes	Heed and forget (too busy)
Soil people	Grows	Heed and grow (bear fruit)

GROUP INTERACTION (page 3)

Have participants share in groups as described previously.

Reflect

Handle this exercise as described previously. The author of this excerpt is Jerry Brown, ex-governor of California.

Share

- Lewis misses the main point (deeper meaning) of Jesus' miracles: to *announce* the arrival of the Messiah and of God's kingdom and to *invite* people to respond to them.
- This is a fun exercise. Encourage participants to let their imaginations roam.
- This is another fun exercise.

Read

These passages may be read aloud in the group and then discussed.

Can you give an example? (page 2)

Paul lists the "fruits of the Holy Spirit" as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23).