

# Christianity: Origins & Contemporary Expressions

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## LCRE Section B

SLSS Religious Education Support

# **Section B: Christianity: Origins and Contemporary Expressions**

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Part 1: The Return to Origins

Part 2: The Vision of Jesus in Context

Part 3: The Message in Conflict

Part 4: The Formation of Christian Community

Part 5: The Christian Message Today

# Topics in Section B

1.1 The Pattern of Return

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1.2 Jesus and his message in contemporary culture

2.1 The Impact of Rome

2.2 Evidence for Jesus of Nazareth

2.3 The Teachings of Jesus and their impact on the community

2.4 Jesus as Messiah (HL)

3.1 Conflict with Establishment

3.2 The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

4.1 The First Christian Communities as seen through one of the writings of Paul

5.1 Interpreting the Message today

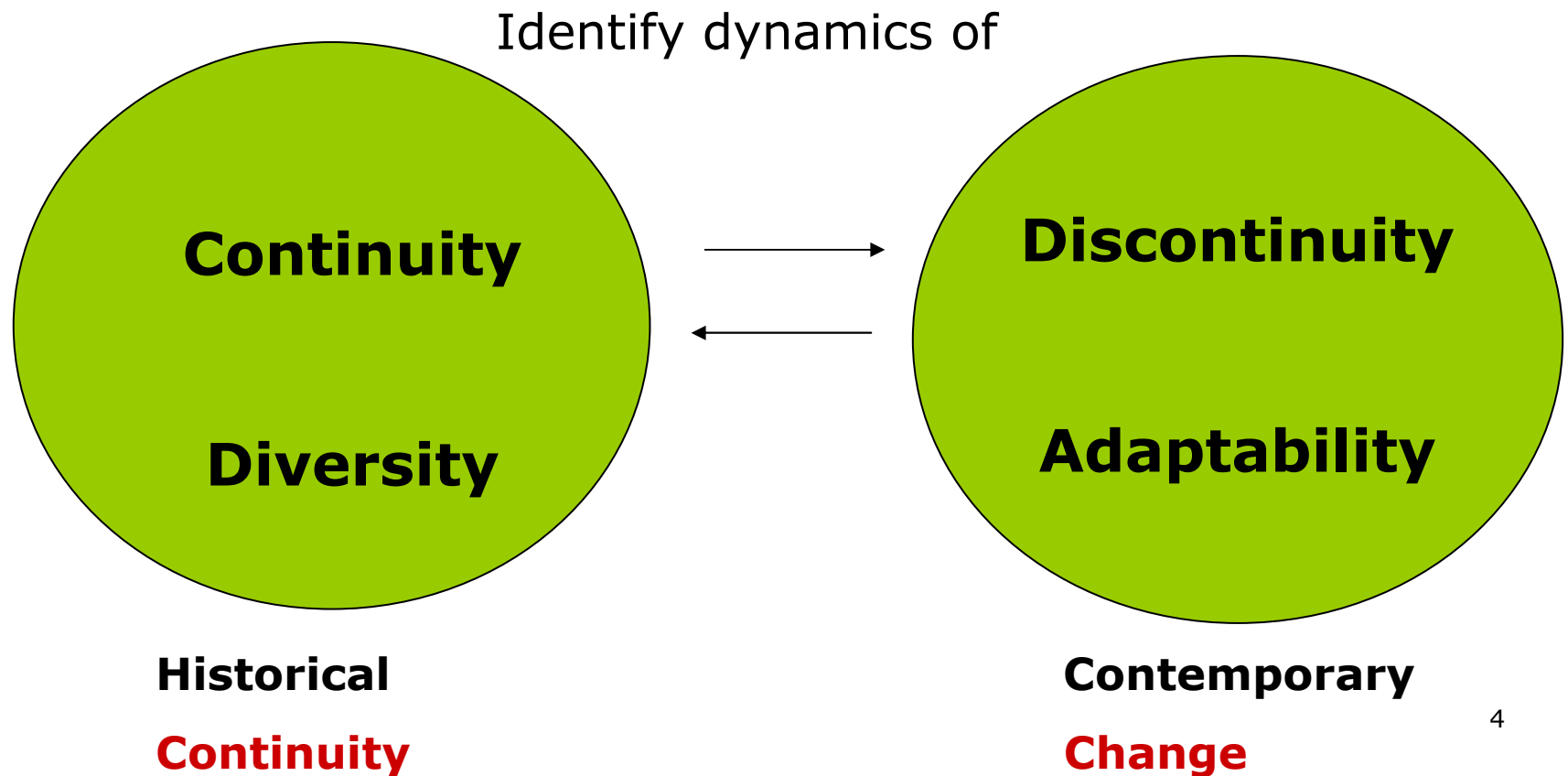
5.2 Trends in Christianity (HL)

Emphasis on origins & contemporary expressions

**Origins** implies the historical nature of Christianity.

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**Contemporary expressions** implies the role of cultural context in shaping belief and practice.



## Topic 1.1 The Pattern of Return

Look around your locality for signs of Christianity... e.g....

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Chester Beatty Library: [www.cbl.ie](http://www.cbl.ie)

### Why return to the founding vision?

Reaction to crisis or  
threat of survival

e.g. Counter  
reformation?

Reignite enthusiasm &  
freedom of expression of  
the founding experience

e.g. Reformation?

Critical dialogue between past & present.

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Secular & religious institutions all have a founding vision e.g.  
GAA, U.N. Religious Orders

**Lost vision**  **Lost direction**

Crisis & new direction e.g.

- GAA allowing Croagh Park to be used for rugby
- U.N. and later E.E.C. / E.U. set up after WW2
- New interest in Celtic Spirituality
- Céilí Dé etc

Jesus is not trapped in history but is relevant in every age.

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Céilí Dé, Mendicant orders & founders, Luther, Evangelical movement in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism, Vatican II, liberation theology: study 2.

Links with Section I Topic 3.4 Religion, Spirituality and Reforms.

Many of these movements happened at times of change or turmoil in the Church or in society. Yet the upheaval and change generated new life.

## 1.2 Jesus & his message in contemporary culture

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Cross-curricular links with music, art & English.

Encourage students to explore relevant website material.

Images of Jesus in music, art, film and literature: inspiration & contemporary context.

Some examples:

Art: George Rouault: iconlike paintings of Jesus among the poor, destitute, proletariat life in Paris. Stanley Spencer, Hugh O' Donoghue.

Literature: Patrick Kavanagh: sacramental image of Jesus... in the bits and pieces of life. Jesus is in relationships and in events.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Ivan Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Walter Percy.



Film: Franco Zeffirelli's 'Jesus of Nazareth'.

Piero Pasolini's 'The Gospel According to Matthew' etc

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## **B2: The Vision of Jesus in Context**

**Distinguish between**

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graph TD; A[Distinguish between] --> B[Identity of Jesus as an historical person]; A --> C[Interpretation of his life from the witness of faith];
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Identity of Jesus  
as an historical  
person

Interpretation of  
his life from the  
witness of faith

**How can we know the historical Jesus?**

## 2.1 The Impact of Rome

1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine was a time of intense transition & crisis.

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This has repercussions on the social, political and religious systems.

Explore how any political regime affects the way people act.  
Historical background to Jesus: Conquest of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE . Jerusalem captured in 63 BCE.

See *Seán Freyne, 1998: The World of the New Testament (Veritas)*.

**Political system:** Rome represented political order & a foreign power. Many people hated the Romans and felt helpless under their rule.



**Social system:** Herodian dynasty had been unpopular, representing corruption among Roman administration. Taxes were a real source of contention. This created social unrest in Palestine. The Jews saw themselves as God's chosen people, yet they were ruled by Rome. They resented being ruled by a foreign power when God was their true leader.

**Religious system:** Secularised religious authorities furthered their own ambitions by subservience to Roman power, e.g. Sadducees.



## 2.2 Evidence for Jesus of Nazareth

Textual sources of evidence: religious & secular

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### Secular sources

**Pliny the Younger:** Imperial legate of the Roman province of Bithynia in Asia Minor, 111.CE. Letter to Trojan (Roman Emperor) advising Trojan on how to treat the rapidly expanding religious group known as Christians.

**Tacitus:** Roman historian, wrote in his Annals about the great fire that swept through Rome in 64 CE. Nero falsified a charge of fire-raising against the Christians in Rome. He says Christians got their name from 'Christ' who was executed by the Procurator, Pontius Pilate, in the reign of Tiberius.

## Religious sources

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- The evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John (study 2)
- Paul
- Josephus

Primary & secondary sources?

Authoritative sources? (gospels)

Evaluate the evidence

## 2.3 The teachings of Jesus and their impact on the community

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Jewish understanding of the Kingdom of God at the time of Jesus.

Reign of God: when God's will is really done.

Kingdom of God: God's will is our well-being, our wholeness, healing & salvation.

**Kingdom of God:** Justice & peace

Healing & wholeness

Fullness of life

*See Elizabeth Johnson, 1990, Consider Jesus, p52*

Jesus brought God's Kingdom in his person, words and deeds...his person, his kerygma (preaching), his praxis, his deeds for the poor & vulnerable, his life & community.

## Characteristics of the Kingdom of God

- 1. Peace as an alternative to violence**
- 2. Inclusion as an alternative to the emergence of elites**
- 3. Sharing of goods as an alternative to the amassing of wealth**
- 4. A God of the powerless as an alternative to a God who sanctions inequalities**

See Teachers' Guidelines p27 for very good description of the characteristics of the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus



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Peace v Violence: Beatitudes Mt 5:9

Inclusion v Elites: Mt 9:12 Jesus eats with sinners; Mt 12:27 exorcism

Sharing of goods v greed/wealth Lk6:20,30,38

God of the powerless v inequalities: mutuality – Jn 13:4 – washing the disciples feet; Jn 13:35; Jn 4 Samaritan woman at well; Jn 8:3-22 woman caught in adultery.

Jewish understanding of Kingdom of God: link to 2.1 Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes.

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Since God was the transcendent, creator and sustainer of the Jewish nation. He was the One and only King of Israel. In time the Jews hoped for an earthly king to rule them with God's justice & be God's representative among the people. King David was the best of Israel's kings, representing Yahweh. Jews believed a son of David's would be raised up and let God rule, and bring God's peace to the land. Rabbis taught that they should live as if the Kingdom of God had already come.

Eschatology – attitude to suffering, prophetic tradition – intervention of God in history...apocalyptic, metanoia



## 2.4 Jesus as messiah (Higher Level)

Expectations of Messiah at time of Jesus

Awareness Jesus had of these expectations

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Messiah = anointed one. Jesus was reluctant to use the title. Socio-political expectations associated with it.

### **Jesus showed alternative meaning to 'Messiah':**

- life of service
- preaching the Kingdom of God
- laying down his life for others

Notion of 'Messiah' was not as contral to Jewish thinking as Christian theology sometimes suggests. Messiah is primarily a human figure.

## Expectations of the Messiah:

**Priestly:** O.T. priesthood associated with Aaron and the tribe of Levi. Priests – indispensable mediators for entrance into the sphere of the divine. Priestly Messiah of Levi or Aaron would help re-establish God's kingdom. Good Samaritan Lk 19:31ff  
Essenes – believed their sect would be vindicated.

**Davidic:** New King David / descendant of David expected to inaugurate the Messianic era (Mk 11:10). Genealogies of Mt & Lk – descent of Jesus can be traced back to David. People want to crown Jesus king at time of miracle of loaves & fish but Jesus goes away.

**Prophetic:** Pharisees – Messiah would deliver them from Roman rule & fulfill the scriptures, and liberate like Moses. Prophet = authoritative messenger and spokesman of God. Jesus was one of a long line of prophets. Baptism of Jesus – Theophany (God appearing in visible form) & going forth with a mission – characteristic of prophetic call. Lk6:16 'God has visited His people'.

## **B3 The Message in Conflict**

Reaction of opposition that Jesus & his followers experienced.

Topic needs sensitive treatment!

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### **3.1 Conflict with establishment**

Jesus' person & message = challenge to Roman Imperial values. His vision of renewal & restoration = a threat to Jewish religious establishment.

Threat to Rome: Jesus' notion of the Kingdom of God = threat to Roman powers in Palestine. Jesus' notion of power & service: whoever is first is last... turns Imperial values up-side down.

## Threat to Jewish religious authorities:

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- Jesus seems to question the Law/Torah when he questions Pharisees' attitudes to the Law.
- Destroying & rebuilding the Temple – seen as a rebellious act.
- Claims to forgive sins = made him a blasphemer.
- Intensification of the norms: you have heard that it was said... but I say to you..Mt 5:21-46 (Jesus was not against the Law!)...concern for human need as superceding religious obligations – in line with the prophets' critique of religion without morality. Mk 11 Jesus in the temple – challenge to religious authorities perceived. Context of Jesus' whole life.

## 3.2 The death and resurrection of Jesus

Historical event – Jewish trial & Roman trial.

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Sanhedrin had no authority to issue sentences of death, so needed to refer Jesus to Pilate = collusion between religious & state authorities in reaction to Jesus.

See C.H. Dodd: The Founder of Christianity

**Faith response** of Jesus' contemporaries:

Peter & apostles flee

Mary stands faithfully at the cross

Roman centurion – truly this man was the Son of God.

Jesus' crucifixion – interpreted as sign of **exclusion**.

Crucifixion reserved for the worst criminals and those outside God's covenant.

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1 Cor 15 Key text for the resurrection, a testimony relating to 38-40 BCE

**Resurrection** – time of change for disciples. New beginning. Lk 24 Road to Emmaus.

- In faith they recognise him as alive, working and present in history.
- Jesus gives them strength to go forth and preach the coming of God among them.
- Community comes to life in a new way. Acts of the Apostles – summary statement of the early community – listening to the apostles' teaching, breaking of bread and prayer (Acts 2:42)

Matthew – emphasised God's covenant with His people.

The risen Jesus is the eschatological presence of God in the midst of people.

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**Matthew's gospel:** structure:

- Jesus' name (Emmanuel) Mt 1:23
- Promise: Where 2 or 3 are gathered Mt 18:20
- His final promise – I will be with you always... Mt 28:18-20

John's gospel shows the community gathered around the risen Jesus Christ.

No proof of resurrection.

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We rely on the credibility of witnesses and the testimonies to their faith which they gave during their lives and even at the time of their deaths.

The resurrection marked a time of change for the disciples – a time of new beginnings and hope.

Jesus gives disciples the strength to go out and preach the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit ten days after Jesus' ascension, bestows missionary zeal upon the disciples: courage to preach and witness to the Gospel of Christ. Many Jews and others converted to Christianity as a result of their preaching.

## **Topic 4.1 The first Christian communities as seen through on of the writings of Paul**

The first Christian communities formed the early Church.

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Many members of the early communities were converts from Judaism – these communities were led by Peter and the apostles. They were persecuted by the Sanhedrin, Pharisees and Sadducees for betraying the Jewish faith. They were barred from the synagogues. Many fled beyond Jerusalem, and spread the Christian faith in the process.

Paul went on 3 missionary journeys and wrote especially to the Gentile converts to Christianity. There were many disputes and arguments in these communities e.g. differing interpretations around the requirements for salvation between the Jews and Gentiles, and the argument over the need for circumcision (Acts 15)

Council of Jerusalem (Gal 2:1-10) is an example of how the early Church came together to address these disagreements and chart the way forward.

Bishops and priests were appointed by Paul to run these local churches and Paul wrote letters to these communities to encourage them to keep their faith alive. He also reprimands them for their disputes and re-focuses them on the person and message of Christ.

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### E.G **Thessalonians**:

Located south of Philippi, on main route across the Balkans. Prosperous city and trading centre. Good cultural mix of people.

Conflict with the Jews, as the community at Thessalonika claimed he was the Messiah.

It was mostly a Gentile-Christian community. There was envy at Paul's successful mission there. Disharmony and tension. Paul was forced to leave early. Yet he loved the people there. There was a lot of opposition from outside the community. Some opponents tried to discredit Paul and others. Within the community there were anxious concerns about the Second Coming of Jesus (Parousia). This had led to some having an overly-carefree attitude. Others worried about the fate of those who had already died and the issue of salvation. Paul urged them all to live holy and good lives, avoiding idleness and ill-discipline.

## Topic 5.1 Interpreting the message today

Choose one:

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- Christians faced with violence, intolerance and sectarianism
- Christian understanding of a just and inclusive society
- Christians and the sharing of the earth's resources
- Christian faith and victory over death
- Christian community life today: structures and authority

[www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie) – investigate the changing religious landscape of Ireland. More Greek, Russian and Romanian Orthodox Christians in Ireland and African Christian churches in recent years.

Interview parents/grandparents/elderly neighbours about how the Christian message was understood and lived in their youth.

How the teaching and work of 1 Christian denomination sees itself as carrying on the message of Jesus.

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Ecclesial Roman Catholic communities – L'arche, Focolare, Saint 'Egidio' – ecumenical contacts.

World Council of Churches: 340 Christian churches in 100 countries.

Violence, intolerance, sectarianism: [www.irishchurches.org](http://www.irishchurches.org) Peace Education Programme

[www.overcomingviolence.org](http://www.overcomingviolence.org)

Justice & inclusive society: [www.trocaire.org](http://www.trocaire.org)

[www.vincentians.ie](http://www.vincentians.ie) [www.christian-aid.org.uk](http://www.christian-aid.org.uk)

[www.corrymeela.org](http://www.corrymeela.org)

Victory over death: [www.mariocurie.org.uk](http://www.mariocurie.org.uk) , Hospice Foundation in Harold's Cross and St. Francis' Hospice, Raheny.

Christian community life today: [www.presbyterianireland.org](http://www.presbyterianireland.org) , [www.ireland.anglican.org](http://www.ireland.anglican.org) , [www.irishmethodist.org](http://www.irishmethodist.org)

## **Topic 5.2 Trends in Christianity**

Teasing out the question: 'Who do you say that I am? – and looking at some contemporary answers.

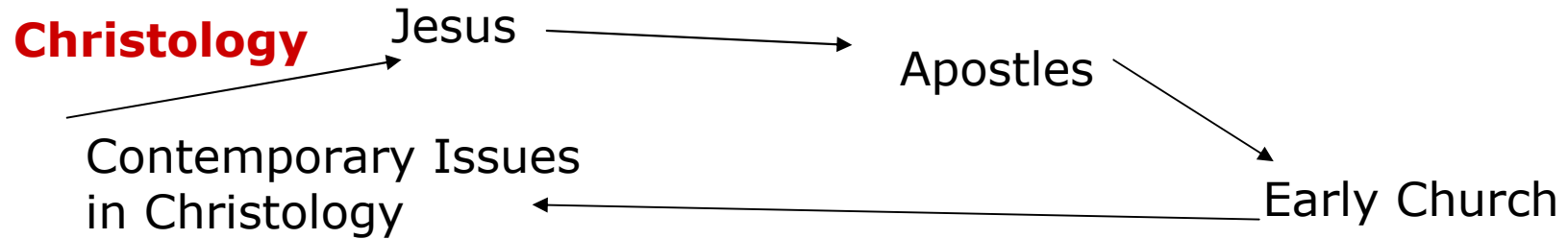
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- Search for Christian unity or Christian worship as remembering Jesus
- Contemporary issues in Christology

### **Christian unity: Achievements & difficulties**

- Vatican II Decree on ecumenism
- One Bread, One Body 1998
- World Council of Churches, 1948
- Anglican / Roman Catholic International Commission
- Taizé
- Christian Unity week
- Local ecumenical initiatives

- Annual women's world day of prayer
  - Ongoing serious theological dialogue
  - Cross border initiatives, conferences and art exhibitions
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- Inter marriage regulations more acceptable
  - Doctrinal difficulties in understanding of the Eucharist, Church and authority; ordination of women
  - Inherited prejudice and memory of the past
  - Geographical distribution of the churches in Ireland (North and South) means little contact
  - Sectarianism, political troubles



Culminates in John's statement that Jesus is the Logos / self-revelation of God.

Encounter with Greek philosophy led to the

**Council of Chalcedon:**

**Jesus is Truly God and Truly Man**

Reformation – return to Biblical theology – Christ as Saviour.

Enlightenment – breakdown of relation of Jesus and the Christ: Jesus of History, Christ of Faith.

## 2 contemporary understandings of Jesus + their writers:

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**Jurgen Moltmann:** Jesus' abandonment and victimhood from a post-holocaust perspective.

Jesus' link with the Spirit and the relevance of Jesus' message in a time of ecological crisis.

**Elizabeth Johnson:** Liberation theology and feminist theology perspectives. Jesus preaching of justice and peace, inclusiveness of women, preaching of 'Abba' in a way that creates a human community of mutuality, his particular treatment of women with grace and respect. Stories of women in the Gospel.