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## THE OPENING SESSION

*This material is an excerpt from Approaching the Gospels Together,  
by Mary Morrison*

Each Participant will need:

- A copy of Records of the Life of Jesus (You are permitted to photocopy pages for class use)
  - The 'Guidelines for Small Group Procedure' (handout)
  - A map of the Holy Land at the time of Jesus (handout)
  - A Bible (having a variety of translations is often helpful)
- It is also helpful to have a *Bible Dictionary* available. (However, it is recommended to save any commentaries to consult *after* the session so as not to impede personal discovery.)

### To begin:

1. Get names, email addresses and phone numbers. Have people introduce themselves very briefly around the circle (it is assumed that you are not sitting in rows, but around a table or in a circle around a room).

2. State the aim of this work, as you see it. The best general statement is: *"To get a good look at the Gospels"*.

3. Explain this is a discussion group method. Lecturing will be at an absolute minimum – only enough to provide background or guidance as needed. The leader's function is simply to ask questions about the text, and to keep the group on track and moving along well.

4. At this point introduce the Guidelines for Group Procedure; review and discuss.

**5. The group is going to do all the work right here with the text.** The meaning will grow out of the text itself as the group works through it. Each member is asked to:

- Accept the discipline of reading as if for the first time. Pretend you don't know anything about the central character or what happens to him. Refuse to think ahead in the story; stay with what you are reading now or have already read in the group.
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- Read simply and directly. As if, for instance, you were reading a good novel.
  - Use the text only – no commentaries or other guides. Trust your own reading of the text, as checked by the readings of other members of the group.
  - When you and the group begin to meet the “big words” – *sin, forgiveness, faith, love*, for example – loaded with centuries of theological content, free them up by insisting that their meaning must be established each time from the saying or story in which they are used. A good way to accomplish this is to use the “missing word” technique, in which you all pretend that there’s a hole in the manuscript at just that point where the big word comes, and ask, “What word or words would you put in here, guessing from the context?”
  - Similarly, when you meet stories or sayings that seem to bear on doctrinal concepts – the divinity of Christ, for example, or justification by faith, or election and grace – set them gently aside, and simply ask of the text, “What is the *most* that’s being said here? What is the *least*? The maximum/minimum approach can be a big help at times like these.

6. Look at the format of Henry Sharman’s Records of the Life of Jesus.

This is the English Revised Version of 1882. It is a good text, even now, as being very close to the Greek of the New Testament.

Explain very briefly how it works, using the introduction on pages v and vi of the book. (You will need to have read and understood yourself beforehand, in order to paraphrase it for the group). They will come to understand the workings of the book best by simply using it, but a quick look at the following will help:

- The column arrangements
- The use of Roman and italic type
- The footnotes
- Section numbers
- Capital letters within the section

This system is a tremendous facilitator for cross-referencing, of which you and the group will be doing a great deal as time goes on.

7. Explain that the group will begin work where Mark begins, at Section 17, where the adult Jesus comes to John for Baptism. There are two reasons for this:

1. *There is very little parallelism until this point, so it is better for the group work to start at section 17 where the three Gospels begin to march in step.*
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2. *Most of the doctrinal matters that the churches have been hung up on for the last 2000 years occur in sections 1–16; it is easier not to get tangled up in them until the group has more experience with the text and is more cohesive.*

So, invite the group to leaf through the first 16 sections, not reading, simply looking. Ask them how much parallelism exists among the three Gospels, reminding them how to get their cues from Roman type, italics and empty spaces. The answer should emerge that there is no direct parallelism, and almost no similarity of the material at all.

It is good, also, to note that there is no Mark for this material, and to note that the parallelism of the three texts (leaf quickly through the book, looking particularly at Section 36–38, 80–114 and 148– 151) breaks down completely when Mark is absent.