

## HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE



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### The Gospels – Study #11

The Gospels are the initial four writings of the New Testament. They center around one person - Jesus of Nazareth, called the "Christ."

#### What Are the Gospels?

They are a unique genre that they are a record of the life and teachings of one person - Jesus Christ. However, they are more than just "the life and times of Jesus." They are a theological presentation by four writers (commonly called "evangelists") who interpret and shape the record according to their theological interests and concerns.

The Gospels are two basic things:

- Sayings and teachings of Jesus
- Narratives about Jesus

We need to remember that these two things are recorded and crafted through the lens of each evangelist.

The Gospels are historical (i.e. they represent historical truth, see Lk 1:1-4; John 19:35; 20:30-31). However, they are not a history or biography of Jesus. For instance, John does not record Jesus' birth. Very little is said in any of the Gospels about Jesus' childhood or home life. One third of John's Gospel (chs 13-19) is devoted to the last 24 hours of Jesus' life.

#### To Whom Were the Gospels Written?

**THE CHURCH!!** Perhaps better: to local churches with particular situational circumstances that the evangelist sought to address from a pastoral perspective.

This is an essential point. While they record the life and teachings of Jesus before Pentecost, they were written after Pentecost to church audiences. Therefore, they are intended for us - teachings concerning the life and mission of those of us who claim to be Jesus followers and citizens of the kingdom he inaugurated.

## Why Were the Gospels Written?

Basically there is one purpose for the Gospels: to give a pastoral "sermon" to a community of believers in a particular situation (John - Jewish, Mark - persecuted) presenting the appropriate response of morality, ethics, and theology of the inaugurated kingdom of God, particularly as they are embodied in, and articulated by, the King of that kingdom - Jesus Christ.

Jesus brought the kingdom. However, it was only inaugurated. We live in the tension of the "time between," or the "now, but not yet." The evangelists sought to speak to the life and belief of the church in this interim of tension and expectation.

## When Were the Gospels written?

|         |            |            |            |
|---------|------------|------------|------------|
| Matthew | 45-55 (#1) | 50-60 (#2) | 60-70 (#3) |
| Mark    | 45-55 (#1) | 67-68 (#2) |            |
| Luke    | 58-60      |            |            |
| John    | 85-100     |            |            |

## Why Four Gospels?

Each gospel presents a pastoral message to churches in different situations and needing different presentations about the King and the nature of the kingdom. Most scholars believe that Mark was probably written first. Matthew and Luke took Mark and re-shaped it for their purposes. John was written fairly independently.

### Matthew:

Presents Christ as Messiah and King. The audience is probably Jewish, and Matthew works hard at showing that Jesus is the fulfillment of OT scriptures. From a pastoral perspective, Matthew is very interested in the appropriate life as a citizen under the rule of the messianic king (e.g. Sermon on the Mount, as per the kingdom life given at Sinai - the new Sinai).

### Mark:

Presents Jesus as Messiah (and Son of God, 1:1), but as the suffering Servant. Under Peter, this Gospel was probably written during a period of great suffering and was intended as an encouragement to the persecuted community of faith (perhaps in Rome under Nero).

### Luke:

Presents Jesus as Saviour and Redeemer. His audience is "Theophilus" (Lover of God). His pastoral emphasis seems to be to present Jesus as the Saviour of all people (Jew and Gentile), and that kingdom citizenship for the whole world is found simply in Jesus.

John:

Presents Jesus as fully divine. Some think that the audience is a Jewish one struggling with Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of OT Messianic prophecy. "But these are written that you may believe that the Christ/Messiah is Jesus" (John 20:31). Others think that the audience is a Greek one, and that the pastoral concern is to combat pagan heresies that were beginning to infiltrate the church.

There are two implications:

- a. We need to get used to reading each Gospel as a "stand alone" text. Attempts to harmonize the Gospels dismantles the purpose and intent of each writer.
- b. When we do compare synoptic passages, we need to do so to see the distinctives and emphases of each evangelist. It is helpful to be aware of the different settings that each evangelist uses to recount an incident or teaching of Jesus.

Comparative Chart of the Gospels

|                                  | <b>Matthew</b>                  | <b>Mark</b>                                 | <b>Luke</b>                        | <b>John</b>  |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Time Focus</i>                | <i>Past, OT</i>                 | <i>Present</i>                              | <i>Future</i>                      | <i>Present, Future</i>                                 |
| <i>Intended Audience</i>         | <i>Jews</i>                     | <i>Roman, Gentiles</i>                      | <i>Jews, Gentiles</i>              | <i>The World</i>                                       |
| <i>Literary Emphasis</i>         | <i>Prophetic, Teaching</i>      | <i>Practical, Anecdotal (Short stories)</i> | <i>Historical</i>                  | <i>Evangelistic</i>                                    |
| <i>Christ seen as.....</i>       | <i>Messiah, Mighty King</i>     | <i>Servant</i>                              | <i>Son of Man</i>                  | <i>Fully Divine (Son of God)</i>                       |
| <i>Main Theme</i>                | <i>Royalty (OT, Messianic)</i>  | <i>Power (Words backed by action)</i>       | <i>Love (God who became human)</i> | <i>"I Am" (Belief in Jesus required for salvation)</i> |
| <i>Greatest emphasis on.....</i> | <i>Jesus' sermons and words</i> | <i>Jesus' miracles and actions</i>          | <i>Jesus' humanity</i>             | <i>The principles of Jesus' teaching (Signs)</i>       |

## Guidelines for Understanding the Gospels

a. We need to recognize that we are reading and hearing primarily the evangelist (gospel writer).

Three questions need to be asked here:

- i. Why is he telling the story?
- ii. Why is he telling the story the way he is?
- iii. Who is he telling the story to? (context)

b. We need to recognize the different literary genres Jesus used in his teaching and speaking, e.g.

Proverb (Matt 6:21; Mark 3:24)

Simile and metaphor (Matt 5:13; 10:16)

Poetry (Matt 7:7-8; Luke 6:27-28)

Questions (Matt 17:25)

Irony (Matt 16:2-3)

Hyperbole (Mark 9:43)

Parable (Matt 13:1-23) (this will be discussed as a separate topic later)

c. We need to understand the argument of the writer as he crafted his account of Jesus to speak to the needs and concerns of his audience. Consider how each writer structured, selected, and adapted the material for his audience.

d. We need to understand that the major emphasis of the material is a pastoral one. It seeks to instruct the people of God about appropriate life as a kingdom citizen.

e. The writers of the Gospels had two major concerns:

- i. To present the historical Jesus (history).
- ii. To present the ethic and morality of the kingdom of God (theology).

f. The material of the Gospels is driven by what we call an "already but not yet" kingdom of God. As the church, we are in the kingdom, but we are not its final consummation.