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### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how important news is in our lives? The important information we receive about the world around us influences our opinions, our values, our plans, and many other aspects of our lives. At times news events are so significant that they change our entire worldview.

Well, when we stop to think about it, the Bible itself is sort of like an archive of news stories. It records all sorts of good and bad news related to God's people throughout history. And as we study these stories, they influence and change us in many ways.

But without a doubt, the best news Scripture has to tell us is a collection of reports that we refer to simply as "the good news" or "the Gospels." They are the life-changing accounts of the person and work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is the first lesson in our series The Gospels. In this series we will explore the books written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. In this lesson, which we have entitled "Introduction to the Gospels," we will gain an orientation toward these books that will help us to understand them more clearly and to apply them more fully to our lives today.

In our Introduction to the Gospels, we will touch on four crucial matters. First, we will examine the Gospels in terms of their literary character. Second, we will look at their status in the church. Third, we'll consider the unity between the Gospels. And fourth, we'll explore the variety that distinguishes them from each other. Let's begin by looking at the literary character of these books.

## LITERARY CHARACTER

Usually, when we read literature, we have some idea of what sort of literature we're reading, and that's what guides us as to how to read it and what we expect. So that, for example, if you read an historical novel, you're not expecting it to be factual history, and you're not misled. Or if you were to read a volume of short stories and you know it's not a continuous novel, you don't read it in that way. So we really need to have some idea of what sort of literature we're reading and what kind of conventions of that literature are operating.

— Dr. Richard Bauckham

We will explore the literary character of the Gospels from two perspectives. First, we will consider the genre of the Gospels — their overarching literary characteristics — and second, we will discuss their historical reliability. Let's first turn to the genre of the four gospels.

## GENRE

In general terms, a genre is a category or type of literature. Genres are typically distinguished from each other on the basis of their literary form and function, such as their style of narration, and their use of figurative language.

The Bible contains many different genres. For example, there is historical narrative, such as the stories about David in the Old Testament. Another genre is poetry, such as the Psalms. Letters or epistles are another genre, and so is prophecy, and so on. Each genre of literature has its own conventions, its own ways of communicating. This is why it is so important for us to understand the genre of the Gospels. It is easier to understand what they teach, if we first understand how they teach.

To understand how the Gospels communicate, we'll identify and describe their genre in three steps. First, we'll make some general statements identifying the Gospels as historical narrative. Second, we'll compare them to a specific type of historical narrative, namely Greco-Roman biography. And third, we'll compare the Gospels to biblical historical narrative, such as the histories in the Old Testament. Let's begin with the general category of historical

narrative.

## Historical Narrative

Historical narratives are stories about people who lived in the past and about the actions and events that took place in their day. At a basic level, the Gospels are historical narratives because they record the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The bulk of the Bible and the Gospels themselves are intentionally written in narrative form because we are story people. We are engaged naturally, not only mentally but even in our emotions and even physical sensations, when we are engaged in a great story. And stories also enable us to live vicariously through the experiences of others. This is a large part of the power of story. And so the Gospels coming to us in the form of literature, in the form of narrative, enable us to not only learn truths about Jesus, but to experience him first hand, to see the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven coming in action, to see Jesus' compassion, not just as a statement — Jesus loves humble people — but to see him tell stories and really live out stories where the humble are lifted up and the proud are brought low. And the stories and the form of literature that the Gospels are enable us also to follow the example of Jesus even as his disciples did. Giving us the stories in narrative form enables us to also follow Jesus in that way. To identify ourselves with those characters in their failures, and in their successes, and to seek to live faithful in our own story, which is our lives.

— Dr. Jonathan Pennington

In the secular writings of the ancient world, historical narratives typically developed in three main parts. The beginning of the narrative introduces characters and establishes a goal for the characters to achieve. The middle often presents challenges or obstacles to the characters' success in accomplishing their goals. The end is the conclusion of the account of events. It usually shows how the characters either did or did not accomplish their goals.

The Gospels follow this same basic outline. Each begins by introducing Jesus as the main character in the story and describes his goal of bringing salvation through God's kingdom. Each continues by presenting challenges to Jesus' authority and work. And each concludes by describing the outcome of Jesus' earthly ministry. Because of these similarities, almost everyone agrees that historical narrative is the overarching genre of the Gospels.

## Greco-Roman Biography

Within the larger category of historical narrative, some interpreters have suggested that the Gospels belong to a smaller group of narratives known as Greco-Roman biography.

We will consider these comparisons between the Gospels and Greco-Roman biography in two steps. First, we'll look at the similarities between them. And second, we'll look at some of their differences. Let's begin with their similarities.

Similarities. Ancient biographies recounted the lives of great leaders. Although they included many different characters and stories, Greco-Roman biographies described these characters and stories in ways that highlighted the featured leader. They defended the leader's ideas, and perpetuated awareness of his actions from one generation to another. And the Gospels were similar to ancient biographies in these ways.

We also see parallels to some ancient biographies in the fact that Matthew and Luke include birth narratives, and all four gospels detail Jesus' death. The Gospels also follow the conventions of ancient biography as they trace the events of Jesus' life. Like other ancient biographers, the gospel writers arranged the events between Jesus' birth and death in various ways. Sometimes they arranged things chronologically. Sometimes they grouped things according to topic. And sometimes they even arranged them around geography.

I think it's important to realize at first, initially, that — to recognize that — the Gospels are generally chronological. For example, they begin with the baptisms by John the Baptist, and then you see Jesus being baptized, then you have Jesus's ministry, followed by his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion and resurrection. And so, in an overall sense, there is chronological order. At the same time, there are

places, if you compare two gospels, there'll be sometimes events, or wording might be given, in a different order. I think that only causes a problem if we read the Gospels as intending or claiming to give precise, chronological order in every single respect. But most authors and most kinds of narrative actually allow for an author to organize his material by order that's other than chronological. For example, often we'll see logical order, or we'll see a topical grouping of subjects. Early Christians, for example Eusebius, an early fourth century Christian historian and bishop, he notes that the differences in the Gospels' order was already widely known, and early readers didn't have a problem with this because they didn't assume that the strict chronological intention was intended.

— Dr. David Redelings

Another important characteristic of Greco-Roman biographies is that they related past events as historical realities so that the past was distinct from the present. Biographies focused on recording the unique, unrepeatable lives and contributions of specific, historical individuals.

In general, ancient biographers tried to research and preserve accurate oral and written records. Consider the example provided by the respected biographer Plutarch, who lived from about A.D. 46 to 120. Plutarch was a secular Greek historian who wrote around A.D. 70, about the same time that the Gospels were written. He began his work *Life of Cicero* with background on Cicero's parents, but acknowledged the limitations of data regarding Cicero's father.

It is generally said, that Helvia, the mother of Cicero, was both well-born and lived a fair life; but of his father nothing is reported but in extremes. For whilst some would have him the son of a fuller, and educated in that trade, others carry back the origin of his family to Tullus Attius, an illustrious king of the Volscians, who waged war not without honour against the Romans.

Plutarch's caution in separating fact from speculation regarding Cicero's parents indicates that at least some ancient biographers paid attention to historical detail, and were interested in accuracy. The Gospels give evidence of being every bit as careful as Plutarch in their reporting.

Broadly speaking, it is fair to say that the Gospels are historical narratives written during a time when biographical literature was popular in the Greco-Roman world. This widespread openness to biographies probably encouraged the Gospel writers in their task, and inclined them to adopt some of the formal conventions of those biographies.

But despite the similarities between the Gospels and Greco-Roman biographies, there are also significant differences.

Differences. Although there are several differences we might mention, we'll focus on just three. First, the Gospels differ from Greco-Roman biographies in their intended audiences.

Ancient biographies were usually intended for broad audiences, while the Gospels were written for the relatively specific audience of the early Christian church. Although they exhibit certain traits of biographies, they are fundamentally intended for religious uses within the church. This specific design is confirmed by how quickly they became regularly used in the teaching and worship of the church.

Second, the Gospels differ from biographies in their emphases. Greco-Roman biographies typically emphasize the personal qualities of their main characters, encouraging others to imitate their life and personalities. Although there are many ways the life of Jesus is our example, the Gospels have a distinctly different focus. They emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus. They focus on him as the one who reveals God and redeems his people as no one else can. This is why so much of the narrative of the Gospels is spent on the last week of his life — the Passion week.

Third, the Gospels and ancient biographies represent different cultures. Biographies gave expression to Greco-Roman interests, values, and life-style. The Gospels are much more influenced by Jewish culture and especially by the Old Testament. This is true even of the Gospel of Luke, the gospel most influenced by Greek culture and thought.

In conclusion, there are notable similarities between the Gospels and Greco-Roman biographies. And these similarities can shed some light on the meaning of the Gospels. But in light of the significant differences between them, it's clear that the Gospels do not fit neatly into the genre of Greco-Roman biography.

Now that we've considered the gospel accounts in terms of general historical narrative and Greco-Roman biography, we're ready to compare them to the genre of biblical historical narrative.

## **Biblical Historical Narrative**

As similar as the Gospels are to typical historical narratives and even to Greco-Roman biographies, they are most similar to the historical narratives in the Old Testament. And this should not surprise us. After all, the Old Testament narratives were a part of the Gospel writers' sacred Scriptures. From the many references each gospel writer made to the Old Testament, we can be confident that they knew the Old Testament well — probably far better than most Christians today. And their familiarity with the Old Testament influenced how they approached their task.

Moreover, the Gospel writers and the authors of the Old Testament historical narratives wrote for a similar purpose, namely, to explain and defend God's covenant with his people. For instance, historical narratives such as Exodus chapters 1 through 19 provide the historical basis for the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus chapters 20 through 24.

This purpose is clear in passages such as Exodus 24:8, where we read this narrative account:

*Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you" (Exodus 24:8).*

Other biblical narratives, such as Joshua chapters 1 through 23, provide the basis for the covenant renewal in Joshua chapter 24. And the narratives of the books of Judges and 1 Samuel are the historical basis of the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel chapter 7. And in a similar way, the Gospels provide the historical foundation for the New Covenant that Jesus established.

Listen to the way Luke's narrative in Luke 22:20 echoes the account in Exodus 24:8 that we just read:

*After the supper [Jesus] took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:20).*

In summary, when we compare the Gospels to other known genres of literature, they are most similar to biblical historical narratives. But this doesn't mean that they are precisely like other biblical historical narratives in every way. After all, they do borrow some features from Greco-Roman biographies. In this sense, we might say that the Gospels are a new type of biblical historical narrative. So, as we read them, it will help to think of the Gospels primarily as biblical historical narratives. But we should also see their biographic emphasis on Jesus, and interpret their other characters in relation to him.

Having explored the genre of the Gospels, we are ready to turn to the question of the reliability of the Gospels as historical accounts about Jesus.

## **RELIABILITY**

Throughout history, a distinction has consistently been drawn between reliable historians and unreliable historians, between reliable sources and unreliable sources. The question for us is: Did the authors of the four gospels write reliable or unreliable records of Jesus' life? While the criteria of our day are not identical to the criteria they followed, there is plenty of evidence that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had the resources and motivation to write trustworthy accounts about Jesus. Although there are countless ways that we might prove that the Gospels are trustworthy historical records of Jesus' life, we'll focus on just six pieces of evidence.

### **Access**

First, the Gospel writers had access to records of the events they recorded. Just like today, the ancient world expected reliable historians to have access to many facts related to their subject.

Consider once again the Roman historian Plutarch. In his opening comments to the Life of Demosthenes, he laid out these common cultural expectations for how a historian should do his work:

If any man undertake to write a history ... it is in the first place and above all things most necessary to ... have plenty of all sorts of books, and ... to hear and inform himself of such particulars as, having escaped the pens of writers, are

more faithfully preserved in the memories of men, lest his work be deficient in many things.

As we can see here, Plutarch strongly believed that a trustworthy historian needed to have access to reliable sources. And he placed a high value on carefully accounting for all available sources, including both written accounts, and those transmitted orally.

Each of the gospel writers was either an eyewitness to the life of Jesus or had direct contact with eyewitnesses to Jesus' life. Since Matthew and John were disciples of Jesus, they were present for many of the events they recorded. Mark was a close companion of Peter, and learned directly through him. And Luke traveled with Paul and sought out reliable eyewitnesses for his gospel. Listen to what Luke wrote in Luke 1:1-3:

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account (Luke 1:1-3).*

## Candor

Second, we can also see the historical reliability of the Gospels in the high level of candor in their works. Ancient standards for good historiography required historians to be candid or honest in the way they reported history. They were expected to report a spectrum of details, including those that were not necessarily favorable to the message being portrayed.

In this respect, it is significant that the gospel writers so frequently described the failures of Jesus' disciples. And in the case of Matthew and John that meant describing their own personal failures. And if some interpreters are right that the young man running naked from the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14:51-52 is Mark himself, then Mark also described his own shortcomings. And without exception, all of the gospel writers exposed the failures of Jesus' disciples as a whole, admitting that the leaders of their infant church movement were far from perfect.

As just one example, Mark 6:51-52 records the disciples' failure to understand Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5000:

*They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened (Mark 6:51-52).*

Time after time, the gospel writers reported the misunderstandings and moral failures of Jesus' disciples. But if mentioning these failures was likely to undercut the authority and respectability of the leaders of the church, why did the gospel writers do it?

Many readers are troubled by the fact that the disciples are presented as less than perfect, and less than perfectly understanding, in the Gospels. For one thing, it points to, if I may put it so, the reliability of the gospel tradition — that our evangelists were prepared, actually, to include things that made the earliest leaders of the church look, if not bad, at least not so good. So, in a sense that's a testimony to the reliability and accuracy of our gospels.

— Dr. David Bauer

Let me suggest to you that the very tendency of the disciples to make themselves look bad in their own stories is one of the strongest arguments for the authenticity of the Gospels. See, if you read ancient accounts of the kings of Babylon or Assyria, or the emperors of Rome, they just go from victory to victory, triumph to triumph: "Here are my glorious exploits!" And so now, of course, we look back and say, well, what really happened? We look at the disciples and they are just these, you know ... Just think of this: what fool would make up a religion in which their hero is crucified, which is proof of sedition and lawlessness to a Roman, and the Romans dominate, and a proof of being accursed to the Jews, and that's your primary audience. You would never make this up unless it happened.

— Dr. Dan Doriani

## Corroboration

Third, our confidence in the reliability of the gospel writers is strengthened by the corroboration of other historical sources. Both Roman and Jewish historians confirmed a number of the

claims of the gospel narratives, and even modern archaeology has found evidence that their records are true.

For instance, Greco-Roman historians such as Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Julius Africanus referred to some of the basic data of Jesus' life, death by crucifixion, and lasting influence.

So we have the Jewish historian Josephus writing a history of the Jews for the Roman government in the first century A.D. who mentions Jesus Christ as existing and having a band of followers. We have the Roman historian Tacitus in the first century A.D., same time period as Josephus, writing about Jesus Christ and having a band of followers. Even the Jewish Talmud mentions that Jesus existed.

— Dr. Steven Tsoukalas

I think there is one general way in which we are really very well placed to consider the reliability of the Gospels, better than we used to be, in the sense that we now know a great deal more about first century Jewish Palestine than we did, say, 50 years ago. And we know that through discovery of literature like the Dead Sea Scrolls, and through archeology. And, archeology in the Holy Land is continuing a pace — constantly new discoveries. So we know a great deal, as it were, the context in which Jesus' ministry took place. And there are all sorts of ways in which we can ask whether the sort of things the Gospels say fit credibly into that context. Does it make sense to see Jesus as a Jewish teacher within that particular sort of context? And I think that, on the whole, we can say that it fits very well. And when we remember that of course conditions in Jewish Palestine changed radically after the Jewish revolt in 66 to 70. So we have, as it were, a limited time period in which to test whether the Gospels fit into that time period, rather than had they been reflecting simply a situation after the Jewish revolt, we wouldn't expect all the material that correlates with the situation we know about in early first century Judaism.

— Dr. Richard Bauckham

## Training

A fourth reason to trust the gospel accounts is that the training Jesus' disciples received should have taught them how to preserve an accurate record of his words and deeds.

Within Jewish culture, discipleship was a well-established way of life. In fact, the Hebrew word for disciple is *talmid*, which means student or learner. Specifically, a disciple was the student of a particular sage or rabbi. Moreover, in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, one of the key exercises in learning from a rabbi was memorization. And one of the responsibilities of his disciples was to learn the words and wisdom of their teacher. Listen to Jesus' words to his disciples in Luke 6:40:

*A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40).*

Jesus meant that all who follow him were to study, learn, and shape their lives according to his teachings and actions.

The twelve disciples closest to Jesus had a great responsibility to learn Jesus' teachings, while many others who learned from Jesus likely committed much of his teaching to memory as well.

## Theological Convictions

Fifth, we must never underestimate the fact that the gospel writers had strong theological convictions that emphasized the need for a true, reliable record. For example, in John 20:31, the apostle wrote these words:

*These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).*

In this passage, John stated plainly that people could receive God's gift of life only if they knew and embraced the truth about Jesus.

In a similar way, Matthew recorded these words of Jesus in 28:19-20 of his gospel:

*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).*

Here, Matthew stated that Jesus' disciples had the responsibility of teaching everything Jesus had commanded them. As genuine followers of Jesus, they could not ignore the need to give true accounts of what he had done and said.

The gospel writers did not record the events of Jesus' life simply for their historical value. On the contrary, they knew that faith in Jesus was more than simply knowing the historical facts about him. But they also knew that true faith could not be based on a false or fallible historical record. They expressed Jesus' words and deeds clearly and accurately because they wanted their readers to believe in the real Jesus, the Jesus of history.

## **Holy Spirit**

Sixth, like all biblical writers, the gospel writers were not left on their own to write their records of Jesus' words and deeds. The Holy Spirit led them in this effort.

The inspiration of Scripture is such a vital doctrine because it gives all of Scripture one ultimate author. So, when we look at the Gospels and we see four different authors give four different perspectives on Jesus, we need to appreciate those perspectives but realize the Holy Spirit inspired all of them. And so they come with very different agendas, theologically, and audiences they're writing to, and backgrounds and experiences with Jesus. But we have a wonderful unity in them while we have a diversity based on the human authorship. The inspiration of the Spirit in Scripture doesn't remove the human element or the human work in that, but what it means is that God gets exactly what he wants through these human efforts.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Listen to Jesus' words in John 14:25-26:

*All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:25-26).*

No matter how good Jesus' disciples were at memorizing, they couldn't have mastered everything. That is why Jesus promised and sent the Holy Spirit to his apostles. And the Holy Spirit enabled them to recall what the church throughout the centuries needed to know about what Jesus had done and said. As John wrote in 21:25 of his gospel:

*Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:25).*

It's interesting when you talk to people about who Jesus is and you ask them who Jesus is, some people might say he's a rabbi, he's a teacher, or some people might claim that if you look at different world religions and different groups, they claim many different things about him. But in the wisdom of God, God led, through his Holy Spirit, his eye witnesses to write the deposit of faith in four complimentary accounts so that we have in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — whether through the author himself or through his sources — we have a definitive eyewitness testimony, safeguarded by the Holy Spirit, which serves as a standard, so that if anyone says, "Well Jesus said this or Jesus would do this or Jesus wouldn't do that," we have written there the undeniable account we can go back to, and God has given us that touchstone for our faith.

— Dr. Robert Plummer

## **STATUS IN THE CHURCH**

Now that we have spoken of the literary character of the Gospels, we are ready to turn to their status in the church as authoritative written texts. We will explore the Gospels' status in the church by considering their composition and their authenticity as the word of God. Let's turn first to their composition.

## COMPOSITION

When we speak of the composition of the Gospels, we have in mind the way they came to be written. Who were their authors? Why did they write these books? How did they write these books? Questions like these are important for Christians to explore because countless interpreters have focused on the human processes of composition to diminish the divine authority of these books. But the good news is that careful exploration gives us every reason to be confident that the Gospels are not only the works of human beings, but also the Word of God.

We'll look at three matters related to the composition of the Gospels. First, we'll explore the similarities between the various gospel accounts. Second, we'll survey some theories of composition that have arisen to explain these similarities. And third, we'll offer some comments regarding the certainty with which we should commit to these theories. Let's begin by considering the similarities between the Gospels.

### Similarities

While composed separately, the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke have often been grouped together and called the Synoptic Gospels. The term "synoptic" simply means, "seeing together," and has been applied to these gospels because they cover largely the same material. They include many of the same accounts of Jesus' words and deeds. And when they report the same sayings of Jesus, they often use exactly the same words.

For instance, consider Jesus' healing of a paralytic. In Matthew 9:6, we read this account of the Lord's words and actions:

*"But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home" (Matthew 9:6).*

Now listen to Mark 2:10-11:

*"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (Mark 2:10-11).*

And, again, In Luke 5:24, we read this:

*“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” He said to the paralyzed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home” (Luke 5:24).*

In this example, we see that each of the Synoptic Gospels contains an almost word-for-word account of the same miracle story. Other parallel stories found in at least two of the three Synoptic Gospels include: the healing of a leper, the exorcism of a demon in Capernaum, the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law, the calming of a storm at sea, the raising of Jairus’ dead daughter, the entrusting of authority to the Twelve, Jesus walking on water, the healing of a man’s withered hand, the feeding of five thousand people with a few loaves and a few fish, and Jesus’ transfiguration.

The three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are often known as the Synoptics because they actually look at things from, as it were, similar perspectives, similar glasses, if you like. And that can sometimes give the impression, why do we need three when one would be sufficient? It would be sad to lose any one of the three Synoptic Gospels because they do actually each contribute something slightly different, and it’s worth just seeing some of the differences between them. Mark’s gospel is the gospel, which has got far more color than some of the other gospels and actually tells some of the individual stories at greater length. Even though it’s a shorter gospel, its individual stories are told at greater length. It’s Matthew who’s then squeezed those stories into a much shorter compass because he’s trying to put so much more into his gospel. And in particular, Matthew is trying to put the teaching of Jesus, which Mark’s gospel, strangely, omits most of Jesus’ teaching. So Matthew’s gospel gives us a very authoritative Jesus, a teaching Jesus, and if you want a kind of compact compendium of Jesus’ teaching, Matthew’s gospel is it. But what’s Luke given us? Well, Luke’s given us yet more teaching. Luke has given us the parables in particular — many more than Matthew — and he’s also given us a far more sort of human portrait of Jesus making contact with all kinds of people, a very inclusive, loving, caring Jesus. Some people think that Luke was not just a medical doctor, but was also something of a psychologist; he’s able to convey human emotion really well. And I think, therefore, in the three gospels, we’ve got three very precious, different texts, which we need to value

each one of them.

— Dr. Peter Walker

I think that the fundamental reason why we have three gospels that account for the life of Jesus in basically the same way is the richness and beauty of who Jesus is cannot be captured by a single account. So when we think of what God intended, no single writer could exhaust for us the significance of what Jesus accomplished, what Jesus said, and what Jesus did. I also want to add to that, however, that we should be sensitive to the differences in the three gospels. Yes, they say essentially the same thing, but there are nuances and colors to each gospel. So, on the one hand they tell us the basic story of what Jesus did and what he accomplished, and at the same time, the gospels also show us different facets of Jesus. So it's sort of like a kaleidoscope, everything is within the kaleidoscope, and yet you look at it from different angles and we see different pictures of who Jesus is. So we see the wisdom of God, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in giving us this multifaceted view of Jesus.

— Dr. Thomas Schreiner

In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, much of the material of John's gospel is unique. While John also recorded that Jesus walked on water and fed five thousand people, he included many events that are not recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, John reported Jesus' turning water into wine, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman, and Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead.

But even though the stories of Jesus' ministry and life vary among the four gospels, all four witness to Jesus' baptism, Jesus' last meal with his disciples, Jesus' death on the cross, and Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

The similarities and differences among the Gospels have led to many competing explanations. So, now let's turn to the theories of the Gospels' composition.

## Theories of Composition

Because of the many similarities between the Synoptic Gospels, scholars have developed many theories regarding their compositional history. These theories are often rather complex and they can be confusing when we first begin to study them. We might summarize the most popular theories in this way: Most interpreters believe that Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke used materials from Mark and perhaps from other sources. But other interpreters believe that Matthew was written first, and that Mark used materials from Matthew, and that Luke used materials from both Matthew and Mark. Still others believe that both Matthew and Luke were based on sources we no longer have, and that Mark used material from both of them. As you can see, even comparing the general characteristics of these theories can be a little confusing.

By contrast, the composition of John is fairly simple. Most interpreters agree that he wrote near the end of the first century, and was familiar with at least one and perhaps all of the synoptic accounts. It is sometimes suggested that he avoided repeating much of the material that he knew had already been mentioned in the Synoptics, and chose to provide additional information that was most relevant to the communities to which he ministered.

With these theories of composition in mind, let's talk about the certainty with which we should hold to them.

## Certainty

At the outset, we should recognize that biblical authors often used oral and written traditions — and this didn't compromise their inspiration or authority. So, there is nothing wrong in principle with believing that any of the gospel writers relied on prior source material. As Luke wrote in Luke 1:1-3:

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us ... Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you (Luke 1:1-3).*

All the other gospel writers seem to have had access to similar sources, although they didn't explicitly mention it the way Luke did. If we assume with the majority of interpreters that Mark wrote first, he didn't have access to any previously written gospel, but he almost certainly used oral traditions, at least from his close friend Peter. Luke and Matthew probably used Mark's gospel as a model. In addition to this, Matthew and John had their own recollection of Jesus' life and teachings. And all four writers were infallibly superintended by the Holy Spirit, as we have seen previously.

In summary, we can appreciate the theories regarding the relationship between the gospels. But we should not feel the need to understand all their intricacies or to commit firmly to any one of them. What these theories offer us is the confidence that the gospel writers each had the ability to draw information from multiple sources, and to construct reliable accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. When we see overlap in their accounts, we have the opportunity to consider the different perspectives of the evangelists, no matter which preceded the other. And when we read material that appears in only one of the Gospels, we can study it in light of that particular writer's purposes.

Having considered the composition of the four gospels, we are ready to address their authenticity.

## **AUTHENTICITY**

In the early centuries of the church, there were some disagreements about which books from the apostolic age truly belonged in the New Testament. Some early church leaders did not acknowledge all the books we now have in the New Testament. Others believed that we should include additional books beyond the twenty-seven that we have now.

But these disputes did not involve the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four gospels — and no others — were always received as genuine and authoritative by the faithful churches of God.

For example, the third century church father Origen, who lived from A.D. 185 to 254, argued that only the four gospels we now possess in the New Testament were authentic.

Origen is quoted by the church historian Eusebius, who lived from about A.D. 263 to about 340. Listen to the words Eusebius attributed to Origen in his work Ecclesiastical History, Book 6, chapter 25, section 4:

The four gospels ... are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven.

In addition, a century earlier the church father Irenaeus, who lived from A.D. 130 to 202, had spoken collectively of a four-fold gospel in his work Against Heresies, Book 3, chapter 11, section 8. Listen to what he wrote:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are... He who was manifested to men that is, Jesus, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit.

Irenaeus said he knew of no time when any of the four was disputed or when any other gospel than these four was used in worship in the church.

## **Trustworthy Authors**

There were at least three reasons for the early church's bold confidence in these four gospels. First, the church received the Gospels as authentic because they were written by the trustworthy authors named in their titles.

It is highly likely that the Gospels were originally anonymous. But it is also likely that when they were first published, they were received by people who knew the authors, or perhaps even distributed with letters identifying the authors. And from the earliest times, Christian writings associated the Gospels with the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — four men known from the New Testament as church leaders with good reputations.

## **Apostolic Approval**

Second, early Christians were also confident in the Gospels' place in the canon from the fact that these books had apostolic approval.

Matthew and John were apostles, eyewitnesses to the words and works of Jesus. Mark was thought to have received much of his material from Peter, who spoke affectionately of Mark as “My son” in 1 Peter 5:13. And as we have already seen, in Luke 1:1-4, Luke explained that he based his work on eyewitness accounts.

Moreover, in his Ecclesiastical History, Eusebius reported that the Apostle John personally approved all three other gospels before writing his own. Listen to what Eusebius wrote about the apostle John in Book 3, chapter 24, section 7 of his work:

The three gospels already mentioned Matthew, Mark and Luke having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness.

## Witness of the Church

And third, all four gospels are supported by the witness of the church in the first century. All four books are old enough that living eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry would have been able to reject or confirm their accounts. And as it happened, the eyewitnesses did confirm them by receiving the Gospels into the churches at a very early date.

God testifies to his own voice in his Word. But for our help, we can look at historical events that are mentioned in Scripture, and we can see that they do correlate with what we know of history from other sources. On a more general plane, we can see that the social conditions, the political conditions, the geography, and all these other kinds of general things mentioned in the Bible, they are consistent with what we know about the historical period in which they were written, including first century Palestine when the Gospels were written. However, when we look at the specific historical things in the Bible and the historical conditions and circumstances they describe, it provides us a reasonable basis for knowing that they come from the time in which they say they come, and that with the Spirit’s testimony, we gain real confidence that they are the Word of God. So in the first century and second century of the early church, the Gospels as we know them, the four canonical Gospels, were received universally as from apostles or from apostolic sources, and were regarded as

faithful and reliable eyewitness testimony of what Jesus did and who he was and the things he taught.

— Rev. Michael Glodo

There are a lot of reasons for believing that the Gospels are reliable, inspired, and have the facts, we might say, straight. But maybe the most important thing I can say is this: that the eyewitnesses sealed their testimony with their lives. You would think that before one of them was flogged, beaten, tossed into jail, crucified, just one of them would have said, “Oh by the way, you know, it’s really just a story.” They died for what they said. Now, of course we all know that people are willing to die... people die for lies all too often. The vast majority of all people who die for lies don’t know they are lies. A tiny number of people will die for a lie that they know to be a lie if it gained them immense power or wealth or prestige during their lifetime. They got none of that. They were nobodies in this world, they were constantly on the run, they were impoverished, they sacrificed, they were beaten, and then they died. And not one of them recanted their testimony. So we can be pretty sure that it happened.

— Dr. Dan Doriani

## UNITY

Now that we have examined the literary character of the Gospels and looked at their place in the church, we are ready to look at the unity between all four New Testament gospels.

We will consider the unity among the Gospels first by affirming that each book tells the same story of the kingdom of God, and second by exploring their emphasis on Jesus as the one who brings the kingdom of God. Let’s begin with the affirmation that the same over-arching story is related by each of the New Testament gospels.

## SAME STORY

In a general sense, we can say that the story that is told in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is the gospel. In fact, this is why the books themselves are referred to as “the Gospels.” They are the books that tell the gospel story. But what exactly is the gospel story?

The word “gospel” translates the Greek word euangelion (εὐαγγέλιον) which simply means “good news.” So, when the Bible talks about the gospel of Jesus, it’s referring to the good news about Jesus. But what exactly is this good news? Who is Jesus? And what story do the Gospels tell about him?

To answer these questions, we need to understand that the word “gospel” sometimes referred to a very specific type of news in the ancient world. Specifically, when warrior kings or emperors conquered new territories, they sometimes made imperial proclamations of their victories in announcements called “good news.” In this use of the term “gospel,” the “good news” was an announcement of a king’s victory and that his reign would bring blessings to his people. In fact, this is also how the term was sometimes used in the Old Testament.

For instance, listen to words of Isaiah 52:7:

*How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7).*

In this passage, Isaiah envisioned the wondrous approach of messengers on the mountains surrounding Jerusalem announcing the good news that Israel’s time of exile was over. They announced peace and salvation because of the reign of God over all.

In the context of Isaiah’s prophecy, the reign of God — the building of his kingdom on earth — was the good news that the people of Israel and Judah needed to hear. It was the news that under God’s kingship, they would have rest from their enemies and live in God’s worldwide kingdom forever.

But in Isaiah’s day, God had not done this yet. Isaiah’s prophecy looked forward to a day in the future when God would come in power as king over the whole earth. And the good news that

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John told us that this day had finally been realized in Jesus. The gospel writers all told the same story, pointing back to Jesus as the one who had brought the kingdom of God, and who was fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies. They were messengers with beautiful feet who announced the good news that the kingdom of God had come to earth through its final king: Jesus. This one story of the coming of the kingdom provides the overarching unity that all four gospels share.

In light of this fact, it should not be surprising to learn that the New Testament gospels use terms like “gospel” and “evangelize” far less frequently than language referring to God’s kingdom. Various forms of the word “gospel” appear in only 23 verses across Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In contrast to this, phrases like “king,” “kingdom of God,” and Matthew’s special term “kingdom of heaven” are used around 150 times.

Now that we understand that all the Gospels tell the same story of the kingdom of God, let’s look at their emphasis on Jesus as the king who brings the kingdom of God.

## JESUS

Our discussion of Jesus and the kingdom will divide into three parts. First, we’ll consider some proofs that the Gospels offer to demonstrate that Jesus brought the kingdom. Second, we’ll describe the vocabulary the Bible uses to talk about Jesus and the kingdom. And third, we’ll see that Jesus brings the kingdom in stages. Let’s begin with some proofs that Jesus brought the kingdom.

### Proofs

There are many different ways that the Gospels assert the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus. But for our purposes in this lesson, we’ll focus on just three. The first proof of the kingdom of God we will mention is Jesus’ power over demons. Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 12:28:

*If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Matthew 12:28).*

In this passage, Jesus had just exorcised a demon. And his ability to cast out demons proved that he had brought the kingdom of God.

A second way the Gospels demonstrate that God's kingdom had come was through Jesus' power to heal the sick and resurrect the dead.

The Gospels regularly indicate that Jesus' power to heal — as well as the same power that he gave to his disciples — was proof that he had brought the kingdom of God. We see this theme in Matthew 4:23-24, 8:5-13, and 10:7-8. We also see it in Luke 9:1-11, and 10:9 — and in many other places. The coming of the kingdom was also seen in Jesus' authority to forgive sins.

Listen to what Isaiah prophesied about the coming Messiah in Isaiah 33:22-24:

*The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it is he who will save us... No one living in Zion will say, "I am ill"; and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven (Isaiah 33:22-24).*

Isaiah indicated that it was God's royal prerogative to heal and to forgive. And he prophesied that healing and forgiveness would eventually come through the Messiah when the Messiah restored God's kingdom on earth.

And this is precisely what Jesus did. He called people to enter God's kingdom. He offered them life instead of death. It was a message of salvation, a message of deliverance from sin. Listen to Jesus' discussion in Mark 2:9-11:

*"Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ..." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (Mark 2:9-11).*

Jesus amazed everyone when he announced that, as the Son of Man in whom the kingdom was present, he had the authority on earth to forgive sin.

In Jesus, God's rule had come. God's reign, God's kingdom, was here on the earth. That meant blessings for God's people. It meant that God's peace, which Isaiah had prophesied so many years before, had finally come.

With these proofs in mind, let's talk about the vocabulary the Gospels use to talk about Jesus and the kingdom.

## Vocabulary

One reason Christians sometimes don't immediately see the Gospels' emphasis on the kingdom of God is that the gospel writers used so many different words to talk about it. Obviously, they used words like "king" and "kingdom." But they also used words like "reign," "rule," "authority," "throne," "Son of David," and many other words that pointed to God's sovereignty and control.

New Testament authors use a variety of vocabulary to talk about the kingdom of God, and not only explicit words, but they also use related concepts. So we can see, for example, that a title for Jesus like *Christos*, which means "the Messiah," "the Anointed One," that speaks in Old Testament language about the king, the son of David. Or we can see in a word like *kurios*, or Lord, a title again for Jesus, which again speaks of him as a king, as someone like Caesar. Caesar had that title as well. And so, within the context and time of the New Testament writers, people would understand the authority that's conveyed by a word like "Lord." Of course, the most important phrase that we have is the phrase "kingdom of God," or in Matthew's case, "kingdom of Heaven" in particular. And so that phrase would talk in two ways. One about a certain domain of Christ's rule over his people, but also it's more of a verbal idea, sort of the reign of God, the authority of God ruling over his people. So, related concepts, like the concept of obedience for example, it isn't explicit in terms of the kingdom of God, but it's certainly implied in terms of the king's authority and the kind of obedience and even worship that is called for in relation to Jesus.

— Dr. Greg Perry

As just one example, the story of Jesus healing the paralyzed man in Mark 2:1-12 doesn't use the words "king" or "kingdom." Verse 10, however, forces us to see the kingdom meaning of the whole story when Jesus says, "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." The kingdom of God had come to earth in Jesus' powerful acts of healing and words of forgiveness. In fact, against the backdrop of Old Testament prophecies describing the glorious, blessed nature of the kingdom of God, every good thing that Jesus did was a taste of God's kingdom in one way or another.

From the Old Testament expectation and hope for the kingdom of God, especially from the Book of Isaiah, the hope of God coming to rule and reign to establish His kingdom was the hope of a time of restoration, when all would be made right. And so one of the things that we see worked out in Jesus' ministry and in the Gospels themselves is that Jesus' healing ministry and his restoring of people, raising of dead sons, and stopping of hemorrhaging, of hemorrhaging of blood from people, and straightening broken limbs, and healing blind eyes. These are not only attestations to Jesus' power and authority in an apologetic way, they certainly are that, they are not only manifestations of the power of God, they are in fact a witness to the hope that God's reign, his restorative kingship, his restorative kingdom, is coming and has now come in Jesus. So this is one of the many ways in which we see the Kingdom of God worked out, even apart from the language of the kingdom of God itself.

— Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Now that we have looked at some proofs that Jesus brought the kingdom of God, and considered the vocabulary the Gospels use to talk about Jesus' kingdom, let's briefly describe the stages in which Jesus brings the kingdom.

## Stages

Jesus taught that the present experience of the kingdom he offered was not the whole picture. Another stage of the kingdom was yet to come. At some point in the future, the kingdom of God would come in all of its fullness. Jesus described this future day in Luke 21:27-28:

*At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:27-28).*

Many Jewish theologians had interpreted the Old Testament to teach that when the Messiah came, he would do away with the old age of sin and death all at once, and replace it with the new age of the kingdom of God.

But Jesus indicated that he was bringing the kingdom in stages. He inaugurated the kingdom during his earthly ministry. The kingdom continues now as he reigns from heaven. And it will be consummated or completed in the future when he returns.

In apocalyptic Judaism, all of reality was divided into two periods: the present evil age and the age to come. And the expectation there is that when God ushered in his end-time kingdom, the age to come, it would happen cataclysmically, suddenly, and absolutely. You move immediately from the period before the kingdom to the period of the kingdom — the age of the kingdom. But in the New Testament, you have what I've called the elongation of New Testament eschatology, so that the age of the kingdom, as was envisaged in apocalyptic Judaism, is subdivided now into two periods: the present, or the "already" of the kingdom of heaven, and the "not yet" of the kingdom of heaven.

— Dr. David Bauer

When we speak about the kingdom of God, we often talk about it as "having come," but actually, we still anticipate the kingdom coming in the future. In fact, Jesus taught us to pray like that: "Your kingdom come now as it is in heaven." And there is a sense in which, because the King has come, he's inaugurated and set up his kingdom here on earth. But we wait for his return. The second coming of Christ will be the day in which all the full benefits of what Jesus did when he first came will — the implications will — be finally worked out. And there is the sense in which every believer has the job of announcing the King's future coming as they go out into this world with the gospel. So we call people to get ready for the day when Christ will return. But yet, as believers, we do enjoy the privilege of having Christ as our Lord now, so we live under his reign now but wait for the

day when we will fully have that realized, not only for us, but actually for the whole of creation too.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Not surprisingly, most Jews in the first century turned away from Jesus because the kingdom he described didn't look like the kingdom they expected and wanted. They expected a king and a kingdom that would overthrow Rome and free the Jews from Roman oppression. When Jesus showed no interest in being that kind of king, many turned their backs and walked away, just as we see in Luke 17:20-25 and John 6:60-69.

And of course, this rejection ultimately led to Jesus' execution. The great irony of the Gospels is that Jesus' death by crucifixion was at the same moment both the climax of the hostility against his kingship, and the victory of his kingship and kingdom. His resurrection and ascension were his path to his royal throne at the right hand of God the Father. This is why Jesus used the forty days between his resurrection and ascension to teach his disciples about the kingdom of God, as Luke reported in Acts 1:3.

In Matthew 28:18, Jesus put it this way just before he ascended into heaven:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18).*

The kingdom of God is the theme of good news that binds together the events of Jesus' life in the Gospels. The Gospels proclaim the good news that God has kept his promise; that his kingdom has come in Jesus. And Jesus' victorious life assures us that one day he will return to consummate his kingdom, bringing us all its blessings in all their fullness.

## VARIETY

So far in this lesson, we have examined the Gospels in terms of their literary character, looked at their status in the church, and considered their unity. At this point, we are ready to talk about the variety that distinguishes them from each other.

As we have seen, all four gospels present the same story of the coming of God's kingdom, but each does this in its own way. We will explore this variety in two main ways. First, we'll look at some apparent difficulties in the reconciling of the gospel accounts. And second, we'll look at the distinctive emphases of each gospel. Let's begin with the apparent difficulties.

## **APPARENT DIFFICULTIES**

When we read the Gospels, the overwhelming impression is how similar they are to each other. There are, however, a number of places where the gospel records appear to say different things. Of course most of these differences are so minor that they cannot with any degree of seriousness be called contradictions. A few, however, do trouble some readers. That is why it's important for us to look at a few of the most significant kinds of apparent difficulties.

### **Chronology**

Some of the most common differences relate to chronology, the order in which events are described in the various gospels.

As biographical narratives, each of the gospels follows the same basic timeline. Each begins with Jesus' birth, then moves to his death, and finally to his resurrection. But they often list other events in Jesus' life in different orders. The reason is that the Gospels sometimes group events according to priorities that were quite acceptable in the first century but might not meet our modern expectations. Rather than following strictly chronological priorities, the Gospels sometimes order their episodes according to theme or geography. For example, Mark told the story of Jesus being rejected in his hometown in Mark 6:1-6. But Luke placed it sooner in the narrative, in Luke 4:14-30, so that it was the first story in Jesus' public ministry. Luke's gospel gives the story more prominence than Mark's does. And it even tells a longer version of the story to emphasize the theme of rejection.

The gospel writers were far less interested in preserving a precise chronological itinerary for Jesus' ministry than they were with clearly communicating the coming of the kingdom in his teachings and actions.

## Omission

A second type of difference is the omission of material in one or more of the gospels. For example, John does not mention the institution of the Lord's Supper in his gospel. Omissions like this can be explained in a number of ways. They may result simply from different writers' emphases. Or they may also result from later gospel writers not feeling the need to repeat portions of what appeared in the books of earlier gospel writers. Whatever the case, omissions do not imply disagreements or contradictions between the gospel writers.

Think about a conversation you've had that involved multiple people. Each person who speaks does not feel the need to repeat everything the others have said already. Instead, each person focuses on adding his own particular perspective, perhaps with some new details, and maybe with a different emphasis.

Scripture does this explicitly from time to time. For instance, in 2 Chronicles 9:29, the Chronicler explicitly said that he was omitting details that had already been recorded by other writers. This also happens at least three other times in 2 Chronicles, and often in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. So, it should not be surprising to find that one gospel writer omitted important materials that had already been mentioned by another.

## Different Events

A third common type of apparent difficulty results from similarities between different events that occurred in Jesus' ministry. That is to say, at times two gospels seem to describe the same event in different ways, but they may actually be describing two similar but different events.

It's important to remember that Jesus was an itinerate preacher. That is, he moved around from place to place. He also performed many of the same types of miracles in different places, healing many who were blind or lame. And of course, Jesus answered many of the same questions and challenges over and over again.

In addition to this, people responded to Jesus in similar ways on different occasions. Consider the accounts of Jesus being anointed in Luke 7:36-50 and Mark 14:3-9. In Luke, Jesus is in the house of a Pharisee, but in Mark, he's in the house of Simon the

Leper. These are not two contradictory reports of the same event. Rather, they are reports of two different events.

## Different Speeches

A fourth type of apparent difficulty is confusion caused by different speeches that had similar content.

One of the best known examples of this is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:1–7:29 of his gospel, and Luke's similar set of teachings in Luke chapter 6:17-49. In Matthew chapter 5:1, we are told that it took place on a mountainside. But in Luke 6:17, we are told that it took place on a level place.

There are at least three ways to approach this problem. First, both Matthew and Luke may be talking about the same sermon given at the same time and place. The Southwestern side of the Sea of Galilee is not a rugged mountainside, but rolling hillsides rising from the sea. This elevated area also has many smaller areas that are relatively flat, so the same geography could be called a mountainside as in Matthew and a level place as in Luke. In the second place this may be an example of the ancient practice of creating a composite speech, putting together into one sermon things that Jesus spoke on different occasions. This is a technique used by ancient historians and raises no questions about integrity or reliability. In the third place, it's also possible that Jesus preached two very similar sermons on two different days, in two different settings: one on a mountainside and one on a plain. Because of the style of Jesus' ministry it's certainly reasonable to assume that Jesus would repeat many of his teachings to new audiences who were unfamiliar with them.

By observing the variety of ways the differences in the Gospels can be harmonized, we can be assured that their united witness to Jesus' life and ministry is true. Yes, there are seeming discrepancies in details. But there are also reasonable explanations for each of these kinds of differences. And when we discover that Jesus taught the same thing on different occasions, we can see the consistency of his ministry and message, and find a variety of ways to apply his teachings to our lives.

We began looking at the variety among the four gospels by asking about apparent difficulties in the texts. So, at this point, we're ready to continue looking at the variety of the four gospels by

exploring their distinctive emphases.

## **DISTINCTIVE EMPHASES**

Because each of the Gospels was written by a unique author who brought his own perspective and concerns to his account of Jesus' life and ministry, there are differences among the four gospels. Knowing that each of the four gospels has been inspired by the Holy Spirit, we are confident that each account is free from error and therefore does not contradict the others. But that doesn't mean that there are no differences. The Holy Spirit used the personalities, interests, and ministry situations of the human authors to shape those differences. So, if we want to be blessed in all the ways the Holy Spirit wants to bless us, we must take the gospel's unique approaches into account when we read them.

In many circumstances in life, we find that different people talk about the same truth in different ways. Anyone who has watched small children play knows that one event can have multiple, compatible interpretations. Each child has his or her own perspective on the games they played. Only by listening to each of them talk about the games can we piece together a picture of what really happened. One might be enthusiastic about the colors of the toys. Another might be more interested in describing the sounds they made. Another might excitedly report running around. These different perspectives do not contradict each other. But they do indicate that each child found some parts of the games more interesting than others.

In a similar way, each gospel writer's own interests and concerns are reflected in his account of the gospel story. No two accounts look exactly the same. All the New Testament gospel stories describe the same Jesus, but they often speak about him in different ways and highlight different aspects of his ministry.

We have four gospels, but one Jesus. What should we make of that? Well, first of all, it's the intelligence of the earliest Christians to recognize that Jesus was far too complex a historical figure to be subsumed under one portrait. The Gospels are like portraits, and so it's recognizably Jesus in all four of the Canonical Gospels, but at the same time they are taking different angles of incidents into the character of Jesus in various ways. I'll give you an example. In the Gospel of John, we have basically no parables and no exorcisms. In

the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is characterized by parables, and the most frequent miracle in the early part of the Gospel of Mark is exorcisms. Well, these are different portraits and yet manifestly the same Jesus. And, each gospel writer has a slightly different point of view about Jesus. Not in the sense that one thinks he's the Christ and another thinks he's not, but that they have different emphases about how to reveal that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and at the same time the Savior of the world. And so, they felt free, and they had the freedom under inspiration to emphasize different aspects and different portions of the ministry of Jesus, and different ways of framing the question and giving answers.

— Dr. Ben Witherington

There are many distinctive characteristics and themes of the Gospels. But in this introductory lesson, we will focus on the way each gospel answers two questions: “Who is Jesus?” and “How do we follow Jesus?” Let's begin by looking at how Matthew answers these important questions.

## Who is Jesus in Matthew?

Of all the gospel writers, Matthew is the one who is most concerned to communicate that Jesus is the messianic king of Israel that was foretold in the Old Testament.

A small sampling of the places Matthew mentions Jesus' kingship includes: chapter 2 verse 2 in which the Magi asked where they could find the “one who has been born king of the Jews”; 7:21-23 in which, as Lord, Jesus said he would not admit all who call him “Lord” to the kingdom of heaven; 20:20-28 when the mother of the apostles James and John requested that her sons be given a privileged place alongside Jesus in the kingdom; 25:31-46 where Jesus told a parable about his judgment as King at the final day; and 27:37 in which Matthew ironically noted that the Roman soldiers put a sign above Jesus' head at the cross that read, “This is Jesus, The King of the Jews.”

It was expected that God's messianic king would bring to earth God's messianic kingdom. He would deliver Israel from exile and her enemies. He would rule with righteousness, establishing peace and prosperity. Jesus did all this, but he did not do it in the way the Jews expected.

Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17).*

Jesus understood that many Jews who witnessed his ministry would think that he was destroying the law of God and failing to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament. That's why he said with emphatic clarity that he was fulfilling the Law and the prophets even if it didn't look that way.

Not only in this passage, but time after time, Matthew reported that Jesus fulfilled one aspect or another of the Old Testament Scriptures, demonstrating that he was truly the messianic king of Israel.

So, according to Matthew, how do we follow Jesus? Jesus perfectly kept the law of God, but that isn't all he did. He said that keeping the outward demands of the law wasn't enough. God has always required the citizens of his kingdom to obey him from the heart. The good news of the gospel is that the kingdom has come, bringing forgiveness and salvation to God's people, and giving us new, obedient hearts. And our changed hearts give us both the power and the motivation to follow Jesus with a loving, thankful, joyful obedience.

When we talk about obeying God from the heart, the heart's really an all-encompassing term. I teach my people it's from head to heart to hand. It's how we need to obey him and how we need to love him. Head would be the seat of the imagination, the seat of the mind, and we're supposed to love God with all of our mind. We're supposed to love God with all of our affections. And we're supposed to love God with all of our hands and feet. So, heart doesn't mean just something in your chest that's thumping away. It's an all-encompassing term. So, do we love God outwardly? Well, indeed we do. But it's also with our affections that we love God. We love God with everything, and I believe that word "heart" points right to that everything.

— Dr. Matt Friedman

Now that we have seen how Matthew's gospel answers our two questions, let's explore what Mark has to say.

## Who is Jesus in Mark?

First, according to Mark, who is Jesus? Throughout his account, Mark emphasized that Jesus was the suffering Son of God who conquered the enemies of God's people. Mark recorded many instances of Jesus' miracles showing his power over the forces of evil. Even though Mark is far shorter than Matthew and Luke's gospels, it records almost as many miracles — eighteen in all.

From the very start of Mark's gospel we see that Jesus was the conquering and suffering Son of God. In the first chapter alone, John the Baptist prophesied Jesus' coming, and then Jesus began his public ministry. He was baptized, was tempted in the desert, called his first disciples, drove out evil spirits, and healed many people from various sicknesses. Even a superficial reading of this action-packed, rapid-fire narrative shows that Jesus was powerfully conquering the enemies of God's kingdom. A closer reading also shows that Mark portrayed him as the suffering Son of God right from the beginning of his ministry.

For instance, in Mark 1:12-13 we read this account following Jesus' baptism:

*At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him (Mark 1:12-13).*

Jesus suffered the onslaught of Satan's attacks from the first moment of his public ministry. And this picture of Jesus as suffering servant continued to grow throughout Mark's gospel as Jesus endured persecutions and rejection.

So, how does Mark say that we should follow Jesus, the suffering conqueror? On one hand, Mark's gospel does not sugar-coat the Christian life. Mark described discipleship as a difficult and often frustrating process in which we not only suffer, but also make mistakes and fail. In fact, a distinctive trait of Mark's gospel is how often Jesus' disciples failed to understand him or to respond in faith. In Mark 4:40 Jesus wondered if his disciples had faith at all; in chapter 6 verse 52, the disciples' "hearts were hardened"; in 7:18, Jesus accused his disciples of being "dull" because

they failed to understand his teachings; in 9:18 the disciples were unable to drive out an evil spirit; in 9:38-41 the disciples mistakenly attempted to hinder an exorcist because they didn't know him; and in the course of chapter 14, one disciple betrayed Jesus to the authorities, one denied all association with Jesus, and the rest abandoned him.

This emphasis in Mark's gospel teaches us at least two things about following Jesus. First, just like the disciples, we won't always understand Jesus. In fact, we're likely to misunderstand many things in the Bible. So, we need to be humble enough to recognize that we all have much to learn. As part of this, we need to receive the Bible's teaching by faith, knowing that God's word is true even if it seems strange or wrong to us.

And second, difficulties and suffering are inevitable for Christians. There are many dangers, many temptations to turn away from following him. Listen to what Jesus said in Mark 8:34-35:

*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it (Mark 8:34-35).*

Jesus taught that we need to be faithful in our commitment to him. We have to be willing to suffer as Jesus suffered, to stand against temptation and spiritual attacks. But notice something else in this passage: Jesus is not only the suffering Son of God; he is also the conquering Son of God. In fact, he conquers through his suffering death. And if we follow him faithfully in suffering for the kingdom, we will be rewarded with eternal life.

Suffering has the effect of focusing our awareness on what is truly important, of getting us — because of pain — getting us to realize, this is not all that there is. There's something more that I'm living for, and I still trust God in the midst of it because I know that the reality of what I have in Christ is greater than my comfort, my safety, and my happiness and those that I care about.

— Dr. John McKinley

Jesus came as a suffering servant. And anyone who would follow Christ needs to have a place in their lives for significant suffering. This is so much a part of who Jesus

is that when we come to this world that is so filled with suffering, if we are to be part of Christ's ministry, we need to have a place for suffering in our own lives. Not only our own suffering, but the suffering of other people, that we actually grieve with those who grieve, and invite their suffering into our lives as well, and become part of that and ministers in that context. And when we enter into this world with a category for suffering and recognition that it's one of the main ways that God wants us to minister as we follow Christ, we're starting to understand the heart of God. And then, God refines us. This suffering produces character, it produces hope, it produces perseverance. And so we are able to see God working in refining ways in our lives, in the midst of suffering as much, if not more, than any way else.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

With Matthew and Mark in mind, let's consider how Luke answers our questions about Jesus and his followers.

## Who is Jesus in Luke?

Luke's gospel answers the question "Who is Jesus?" by proclaiming that he is the compassionate Savior of the world. Jesus brought God's salvation to the rich and the poor alike, to the religious leaders and to the social outcasts. Jesus' good news was for everyone — even for the unnoticed and the despised. Luke emphasized this in many ways. Jesus honored the sisters Mary and Martha in a time when many men considered women inferior. Luke recorded parables and narratives that presented women, the sick and the crippled, and even non-Jews, as worthy of praise and imitation. Jesus praised the widow who gave her small life's savings at the temple. Luke told the story of the despised tax collector Zacchaeus, whose response to Jesus was a model for all Luke's readers. Time after time, Luke recorded Jesus' concerns for those that society rejected or overlooked.

As just one example, listen to this account from Luke 7:12-16:

*As [Jesus] approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out — the only son of his mother, and she was a widow... When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those*

*carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people" (Luke 7:12-16).*

In the first-century Roman world, a widow who had lost her son would have had little means of provision, and little opportunity to find work. By emphasizing Jesus' compassion for her, Luke pointed out that the Lord's work as a savior was intended even for the poor and helpless. As the people at the end of this account commented, Jesus' ministry to the needy and powerless was proof that God had come to help his people.

So, how does Luke's gospel answer the second question: How do we follow Jesus? Well, in keeping with Luke's concern for the poor, one thing we can do is have compassion on others. We should care for the poor, and strive to meet their needs. We should be willing to give our possessions, food, money and time to sustain them. In fact, God often sends charitable Christians in answer to the prayers of the needy. As Jesus said in Luke 12:33:

*Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys (Luke 12:33).*

When we follow Jesus faithfully by caring for his people, he rewards us with an eternal inheritance.

Another way we can follow Jesus is by resting confidently in the fact that God will meet our needs too. Listen to Jesus' words in Luke 12:22-31:

*Do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear... And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it... But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well (Luke 12:22-31).*

As members of God's kingdom, we can be confident that our great king Jesus Christ will care for us and meet our needs.

And this emphasis on trusting the Savior is closely related to two other themes in Luke's gospel: peace and joy. For instance, near the beginning of Luke's gospel, in Luke 2:10-14, we read this

angelic announcement:

*I bring you good news of great joy... Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace (Luke 2:10-14).*

And twenty-two chapters later, Luke ended his gospel the same way he began it. At the end of his story, the disciples were following Jesus and experiencing the joy that the angels had prophesied back in chapter 2.

Three times in that conversation, in John 20, Jesus says, “Peace be with you.” And I don’t think he was saying hello. I think he was saying this is the foundation of reality. Even though you’ve just been through agony, you’ve lost the one you love, and you never knew I was going to come back, you’re going to soon be under the Romans’ dictatorship, you’ve lived under oppression, it’s going to get much worse, I want you to know that I’m here, and when I’m here, I bring a fundamental peace. I am your joy. So that no matter what happens, no matter what happens in your outward life, no matter what’s inside your life, if you know me, there’s a foundation of real peace. The biblical word is “shalom,” this holistic righteous reign and rule of God no matter what comes down the pike. And, I bring joy. I’m not just here to mollify you. I’m here to bring you real joy, joy that is more than emotion. Joy that is a positive understanding that I am in control of all the world, and that I will let nothing happen to you that doesn’t come through me first, Jesus says. I love the way Paul says it when he talks about the fruit of the Spirit. He says when the Holy Spirit comes to fill up Christians’ lives, all of you will love; the next word is, you’ll have joy. And I think that those are inseparable. Of course, he adds six other things, but the major thing is that when the love of God is shed or brought in my heart, the response is, I don’t then live by my own understanding of reality, which would be probably pretty cynical, pretty pessimistic, pretty negative. But when Jesus is present, the only response is, I’m at peace. He has brought his resurrection power to my life, and I have joy, I have hope, because in Jesus, there is no defeat. There is no “things coming apart.” He brings all things together, holistically, completely.

— Dr. Bill Ury

Listen to Luke's final words in 24:52-53:

*Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God (Luke 24:52-53).*

In Luke's gospel, following Jesus means rejoicing in our salvation and all of God's blessings, peacefully resting in him, trusting in him to meet all our needs, and being willing to be used by him to bring these same blessings to others.

Having seen how Matthew, Mark, and Luke answer the questions, "Who is Jesus?" and "How do we follow him?", we're ready to consider how John uniquely answered these questions.

## Who is Jesus in John?

In his gospel, John portrayed Jesus as the Son of God who accomplishes the eternal plan of salvation. In emphasizing Jesus' identity as the Son of God, John spoke of Jesus' unique relationship with his Father. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of his Father and the only one able to make eternal life available to all those who put their faith in him. For instance, whereas the other three gospel writers began their accounts with the birth of Jesus or his earthly ministry, John began his gospel by saying that the Son of God had been involved with the Father in creation, and now the Father was being revealed through his one and only Son.

Another way John communicated this glorious message was in the "I am" sayings made by Jesus. In these statements, Jesus alluded to God's covenant name "Yahweh," sometimes translated "Jehovah." In Exodus 3:14, God himself explained that the name "Yahweh" essentially means "I am." Jesus alluded to this name in John 6:35, where he said, "I am the bread of life." We also find it in 8:12 and 9:5 in the phrase "I am the light of the world." And in 10:7, 9 we read "I am the gate." In 11:25, it's "I am the resurrection and the life." In 14:6, it's "I am the way and the truth and the life." In 15:1, we find "I am the true vine." And in 8:58, Jesus made the climactic announcement, "I am." In each of these instances, Jesus declared himself to be the bearer of the sacred Old Testament name of God, and revealed God in his own person.

Jesus' place at the center of God's eternal plan of salvation is particularly evident in Jesus' high priestly prayer in John chapter 17. Listen to what Jesus prayed in John 17:24:

*Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world (John 17:24).*

Jesus related the salvation of his followers to the love that the Father had for the Son before creation. His point was that our salvation is an outpouring of the Father's love for Jesus.

So, if John portrayed Jesus as the Son of God who accomplished the eternal plan of salvation, how does John's gospel answer our second question? How do we follow Jesus?

In John's gospel, the primary way we follow Jesus is by being loved by God, and by showing that same love to each other. Jesus established this model for us to follow in many ways. For instance, we see it in John 17:23-26, where Jesus spoke of the Father's love for his Son. It was this eternal love of the Father for the Son that was behind the eternal plan of salvation that Jesus accomplished. So, it makes sense that in John's gospel discipleship is characterized by love. As Jesus said to his followers in John 13:34-35:

*Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35).*

According to John, we follow Jesus by loving each other with his kind of love.

In this way, discipleship is both initiated and conducted in love. God's love for us initiates our discipleship. And God's love through us to each other is the expression of our discipleship. This helps us understand why John referred to himself throughout his gospel as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and not "the disciple that loved." He knew that whatever ability he had to love others came from the depth of Jesus' love for him. Jesus' followers are first loved, and then they are called to love one another.

One might wonder if the differences in the distinctives in the four gospels somehow indicates that they are incompatible, that they are telling contradictory stories, but I don't think that's the case at all. I think that what we have in the four gospels are four compatible perspectives on the story of Jesus. All four gospels are unified in the idea that they are telling us the history of this man who is the incarnation of God who comes into the world to save sinners from sin and death. And each gospel does look at that Jesus from different perspectives and emphasize different details of his life, but those messages and perspectives are not contradictory, but they are compatible.

— Dr. Steve Cowan

## CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have been introduced to the study of the Gospels. We have seen their literary character, noting that the Gospels are reliable historical narratives. We have also considered their status in the church, seeing that they are an authentic part of the New Testament Scriptures. And we have looked at them in comparison to one another, finding that they all tell the same story of the kingdom of God, even though each portrays Jesus and discipleship in its own distinctive way.

Understanding the Gospels is critical for every Christian. We place all our confidence in this life and the next in the hands of Jesus, whom we have never seen face-to-face. Everything we know about him, we know through his Word — especially the Gospels. Hopefully, the things we have learned in this introductory lesson have prepared us to explore each of the four gospels in much more depth, in order to understand how each evangelist's message impacts our faith and life.