

THE EQUIP INSTITUTE

Theme: Christian Story

Topic: The Gospels and Acts

Fall 2023

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This week, we are beginning a three-week overview of the New Testament.

Introduction to the Gospels

The Gospels are part of an ancient genre called *bios*, which was a form of biography that focused on an individual's life and teachings. The Gospels present historical events, but not always in a strict chronology. The Gospels are historical-theological documents that are arranged in such a way as to communicate to readers who Jesus is, what Jesus taught, what Jesus did, and why belief in Jesus matters. Though Jesus is referenced in a few other writings, nearly everything we know about Jesus comes from the four canonical Gospels.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are closely related to each other. They are called the **Synoptic Gospels** because they summarize most of Jesus's public ministry and tend to be arranged more chronologically than John's Gospel. Mark was probably the earliest Gospel (mid-50s). He likely relied upon eyewitness testimony from Peter. Matthew's Gospel was probably written next (early 60s) and likely relied upon Mark, oral tradition, and of course Matthew's own memory. Luke's Gospel was probably written next (mid-60s) and relied upon many sources, perhaps also including Mark. Luke was a close associate of Paul. Luke also wrote Acts, around the same time, and the two books are meant to be read together.

John is arranged more thematically than the Synoptic Gospels and covers less of Jesus's ministry. Though all the Gospels are concerned with theology, sometimes John's Gospel is referred to as the most theological of the Gospels. The author was the Apostle John. The early church was unanimous in its belief that John's Gospel was the last to be written and was intended to complement the Synoptics. John probably wrote sometime between 70 and 95, but nobody knows for certain.

The differences in wording or details in the Gospels do not undermine the authority and truthfulness of Scripture. First, the authors weren't writing a strict chronology, but were arranging their Gospels to make particular arguments to specific readers. Second, most scholars agree that many of Jesus's teachings were probably offered more than once, to different audiences on different occasions. The authors are always recording true words that Jesus spoke, but not always necessarily quoting Jesus exactly.

The Four Gospels

The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew begins with Jesus's genealogy and birth narrative, then culminates with Jesus's death, resurrection, and commissioning of His disciples. Matthew frames his Gospel around Jesus's relationship to Israel and shows how Israel rejected Jesus as messiah. Jesus proclaims God's kingdom and points to that kingdom through both His teachings and miracles. Jesus fulfills Judaism through His perfect obedience to the law, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection. He is constituting a new people, the church, which includes members from all nations.

Matthew's Gospel includes five discourses (teaching units): The Sermon on the Mount (chs. 5-7); the calling and sending of the disciples (ch. 10); the parables (ch. 13); kingdom and church (ch. 18); and eschatology (chs. 23-25). These discourses function as a discipleship manual embedded in Matthew's story of Jesus's life and ministry.

Other Major Themes:

- Jesus is simultaneously the promised messiah, the rightful heir of David's throne, and the divine Son of God
- Jesus is the rightful interpreter of the meaning and application of God's law
- The kingdom of heaven is already among us, but not yet revealed fully
- Israel has lost her way, but should repent and reclaim her calling as a light to the nations
- Israel's judgment has already begun, but one day God will judge all people, put everything right, and fully consummate the kingdom of heaven

The Gospel of Mark

Mark begins with Jesus’s ministry of proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom in word and demonstrating it in deed. The first half of the Gospel (1:1–8:30) focuses on Jesus’s messianic identity. The latter half (8:31–16:8) focuses upon Jesus’s fulfillment of that identity through His death and resurrection. Mark is focused more on Jesus’s actions than His teachings, and there is a quick pace to Mark’s narrative. Mark also emphasizes that Jesus’s identity and the nature of the kingdom are mysterious, though Jesus gradually and strategically reveals both to the disciples.

Mark only has two discourses: one devoted to parables (4:1–33) and another devoted to eschatology (ch. 13). However, he focuses on Jesus’s miracles more than Matthew and Luke. Mark also focuses upon the disciples’ repeated failures to really understand Jesus. Mark devotes over a quarter of His gospel to Jesus’s final week, yet he says relatively little about Jesus’s resurrection and ascension compared to the other Gospels.

Other Major Themes:

- Jesus is both the Son of God and the Son of Man
- Jesus is the true King, which puts Him in conflict with rival powers, whether they are demonic or human
- Jesus is the suffering Servant, through which He gives His life as a ransom for many
- Jesus’s followers should imitate Him by being humble, serving others, and even suffering

The Gospel of Luke

Luke is the longest Gospel and devotes far more space to parables than the others. Like Matthew, Luke begins with Jesus’s genealogy and birth narrative, then culminates with Jesus’s death, resurrection, and commissioning of His disciples. Luke’s Gospel is structured around a geographic progression from Jesus’s itinerant ministry in Galilee to its culmination in Jerusalem. Luke writes for a primarily Gentile audience, so he focuses on God’s eternal plan, which was promised in the Old Testament and is now being fulfilled through Jesus’s life and ministry.

For Luke, everything about the Old Testament points to Jesus (24:44–45). Like Adam, Jesus is God’s son. He is the promised messiah, the suffering servant, and the

coming King. He is a prophet like Moses. He has come to save humans from our sin and to defeat Satan and his minions. He fulfills God's law and the various covenants God made with Israel. Though most Jews reject Jesus, bringing judgment upon Israel, Jesus is constituting a new people comprised of Jews and Gentiles.

Other Major Themes:

- God is sovereign over history, which is now culminating in Jesus's incarnation, ministry, and death
- The presence and power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus's ministry, which is also promised to His followers
- The importance of prayer and worship for God's people
- The great reversal of worldly expectations about power and position: the kingdom is for the poor, the oppressed, the demonized, women, Samaritans, Jewish sinners, and Gentile unbelievers

The Gospel of John

John's Gospel is very different from the Synoptics. His entire Gospel is a "deep dive" into the identity of Jesus. Whereas the Synoptics build up to the idea that Jesus is both divine and human, John makes it clear from the start. John begins with eternity past, reframing creation as the work of the eternal Son who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus has supernatural knowledge and authority over all creation. God's Triune nature permeates John's Gospel. The Father sends the Son, who represents and reveals the Father. The Son is empowered by the Spirit, whom the Son will send to help His followers.

John's focus is less on the kingdom that Jesus has inaugurated and more on the everlasting life Jesus gives to those who enter His kingdom through faith. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the world's sin. Sinners must be born again and should continue to abide in Jesus by faith. As the Father and Son are united, so believers should be united through the Spirit. Jesus's mission is continued by His followers, whom He sends out in the power of the Spirit.

John includes many familiar events and discourses from the other Gospels (as well as some new ones). But the structure of John's Gospel has three distinctives, all of which help demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Jewish festivals and institutions (including the Temple),

is Yahweh, and is sovereign over all creation. First, the structure is far more thematic than chronological, with a much greater emphasis on Jesus's time in Jerusalem.

Second, John includes seven "I am" statements wherein Jesus identifies Himself with Yahweh:

- 1) I am the Bread of Life (6:35)
- 2) I am the Light of the World (8:12)
- 3) I am the Gate for the Sheep (10:7)
- 4) I am the Good Shepherd (10:11)
- 5) I am the Resurrection and the Life (11:25)
- 6) I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life (14:6)
- 7) I am the True Vine (15:1)

Third, John includes seven signs (key miracles) that demonstrate His power over the created order:

- 1) Turning Water into Wine (2:1–12)
- 2) Healing the Nobleman's Son (4:46–54)
- 3) Healing the Man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1–11)
- 4) Feeding of the 5,000 (6:1–15)
- 5) Walking on Water (6:16–21)
- 6) Healing the Man Born Blind (9:1–12)
- 7) Resurrecting Lazarus (11:1–44)

The Acts of the Apostles

Luke wrote Acts as a sequel to his Gospel. Thus, there is a lot of thematic overlap. Luke is writing for a primarily Gentile readership. Acts covers the first generation of Christian expansion, from approximately 30–65 AD. The major figures are Peter (chs. 1–5; 10–12), Hellenistic Jewish evangelists (chs. 6–8), and Paul (chs. 9; 13–28). The structure of Acts has three key distinctives. First, Acts 1:8 serves as a thematic outline for the entire book as the gospel spreads from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and then to much of the rest of the Roman world (and sometimes beyond).

Second, there are several "evangelistic discourses" where one of the apostles recounts the gospel to unbelievers. Sometimes, discourses are delivered to unbelieving Jews (e.g. 2:14–39 and 3:12–26). Other times, discourses are directed to Gentile unbelievers (e.g. 10:34–43; 13:16–38; 24:1–21). Some of these discourses, most famously Paul's address at Mars Hill, are primarily apologetic (17:22–33).

Finally, there is a sense in which the identity of the church is developing gradually throughout Acts. It represents a transitional time in redemptive history, from earliest Jewish followers of Jesus in Palestine who embraced “the way” to an increasingly multi-ethnic and transnational community called Christianity. For this reason, Christians continue to debate how much of Acts should be read *descriptively* rather than *prescriptively*.

Major Themes:

- Jesus as the universal fulfillment of the particular promises given to the Jews
- The gospel as a universal message and believers as a missionary people
- The presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church
- The gospel’s power to save individual sinners and push back against the powers of darkness
- The role of signs and wonders in the earliest proclamation of the gospel
- The spiritual unity of Jews and Gentiles through the new covenant of Jesus rather than through adherence to old covenant signs and ceremonies
- The importance of maintaining practical unity whenever division is threatened
- The role of suffering in the advance of the kingdom
- The continued growth of the early church, despite persecution

Recommended Resources

D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *Introducing the New Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message*, ed. Andrew David Naselli (Zondervan, 2013).

Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (B&H Academic, 2016).

Darrell Bock and Benjamin Simpson, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2017).

Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2007).
