

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS

The first four books of the New Testament tell the story of Jesus. They are called “gospels” because the term means “good news.” (The English word translates the Greek term *euangelion*, “good news.”) Toward the end of the second century, the term began to be used as a title for these four books. The writers of the New Testament used the term “gospel” in several ways.

The word was used to describe the content of Jesus’ preaching. For example in Mark 1:14-15 we read, After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (NIV) Jesus was preaching that God was ready to bring salvation to the people in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.

The word “gospel” was also used to describe the message the early Christians proclaimed to the world. This was a message centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Cor 15:1-4, Paul wrote, *Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.* (NIV)

When we use the term “gospel” to refer to the total system of truth revealed through Christ and the apostles, there is, of course, only one gospel, Romans 1:16; Phil. 1:27. However, when we use it to designate a literary form, there are four *Gospels*.

The titles *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John* refer to the authors of the books and are shortened forms of the full titles: *The Gospel According to Matthew*, and so on. The Gospels are not biographies of Jesus. They are accurate accounts of Jesus’ life and death, but they were not written just to inform those who read. The writers wanted the readers to come to faith in Jesus. John helps us to understand this in John 20:30-31, when he wrote, *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But 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.* (NIV) Therefore, the writers carefully selected events, miracles, and teachings and then arranged them in such a way that we would be drawn to Jesus as Lord.

How did the Gospels come to be written? First, the facts of Jesus’ life and teachings circulated in oral form. Then bits and pieces of this material began to be written down. Finally, the Holy Spirit guided four men to write—from personal observation, oral reports, and written sources known to them—the four books we have in our possession now. Compare the following statement from Luke 1:1-4, 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 for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (NIV) The ultimate factor in the writing of all Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit as Jesus promised in John 16:13: *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all*

truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. (NIV)

But why do we need *four* Gospels? Couldn't someone have written just one story and included everything? The four gospels give us four different perspectives on Jesus. If you and three friends were to see a serious accident at the very same time and each of you were asked to write about what you saw, you would write from four different perspectives. One account might focus on which car caused the accident, another might focus on the people injured, another might focus attention on the way the police handled the accident and the fourth might zero in on how the different ambulance personnel worked with the injured. Each account would be accurate, but each would have its own unique emphasis.

The early Christians recognized that there was only one gospel story, but that each gospel writer brought his own perspective to that story—and each had a particular audience in mind. For example:

MATTHEW, writing principally to Jews, portrays Jesus as the MESSIAH who was foretold in the Old Testament. The term “Messiah” in the Old Testament is used of priests and kings who had been consecrated to the office by the ceremony of anointing (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: 3:2039) (See Lev. 4:3; 8:12; I Sam. 10:1). The priest was designated as “the anointed priest” and later kings were known as “the Lord’s anointed one” (I Sam. 24:6, 10; 2 Sam. 19:21, etc.). The term “Messiah” means “the anointed one.” This Aramaic title is found only twice in the New Testament (Jno. 1:41; and 4:25). In the other places it is the Greek word *Christos*, translated “Christ.” Therefore, Jesus is the Christ (the anointed one). “Christ Jesus” means that He is “the anointed Savior.” **MATTHEW** also presents Jesus as KING, and because of the frequent references to His kingdom, the book may be referred to as “The Kingdom Gospel.” The kingdom over which Jesus was to rule had been prophesied in the Old Testament (Dan. 2:44; 7:13-14). The expression “kingdom of heaven” occurs more than thirty times in Matthew.

MARK’S emphasis was on Jesus as the Servant of God. Mark wrote principally for the Romans. Since the Roman audience wanted a man of action, Mark focused on what Jesus did, and not so much on what Jesus taught. He gave more attention to the miracles of Jesus and focused more on the divinity of Christ.

LUKE was gripped by the humanity and compassion of Jesus. Luke’s Greek audience was moved by the tender side of Jesus as he healed the sick or gathered children in His arms. Luke portrays Jesus as the Son of God (1:35; 8:28; 22:70) but he emphasizes Jesus as the perfect man. The expression “the Son of Man” is used some twenty-five times in Luke. Jesus referred to Himself as “Son of Man” more than any other title, and in doing so He identified Himself with man.

JOHN is the only one of the four gospels that is chronological throughout. It has a distinctive style. The book consists largely of discourses and conversations of Jesus. While Matthew appeals to the Jews, Mark to the Romans, and Luke to the Greeks, John is more universal in his appeal. John omits much of what the synoptic writers record, but he also includes much of what they omit. John wrote his gospel to convince the world that Jesus is God—Jesus is the eternal God who became fully human and lived here where men could see Him. The first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, have been called the **Synoptic Gospels**. The word “synoptic” means, “to see together/from the same perspective.” Because the first three Gospels present a common

approach to and duplicate much of the same material from the life of Jesus, they have come to be known as the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospels certainly do not contain pointless repetition. Each has its distinctive purpose and audience as we have seen above. By reading all the Gospels, one appreciates the Christ more fully—as in seeing the different facets of a diamond. Since the original Gospels circulated independently of one another, the Holy Spirit saw to it that they presented the same basic information to those who would learn of Christ through them.