

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Telling the New Testament
Story of God



SESSION 4

Introduction to the Gospels

NOTICE TO CLT PARTICIPANTS AND EDUCATORS

This is a contract. By using these materials you accept all the terms and conditions of this Agreement. This Agreement covers all Leader's Guides, Student Guides, and instructional resources included in the Continuing Lay Training (CLT) website.

Upon your acceptance of this Agreement, Continuing Lay Training grants to you a nonexclusive license to use these curricular materials provided that you agree to the following:

1. USE OF THE MODULES.

- You may distribute educational materials in electronic form to students or other educational providers.
- You may make and distribute electronic or paper copies to students for the purpose of instruction, as long as each copy contains this Agreement and the same copyright and other proprietary notices pertaining to the Module. If you download the educational materials from the Internet or similar online source, you must include the CLT notice for the Module with any online distribution and on any media you distribute that includes the educational content.
- You may translate, adapt, and/or modify the examples and instructional resources for the purpose of making the instruction culturally relevant to your students. However, you must agree that you will not sell these modified materials without express, written permission from CLT.

2. COPYRIGHT.

The material is owned by CLT and is protected by United States Copyright Law and International Treaty provisions. Except as stated above, this Agreement does not grant you any intellectual property rights in the Module.

3. RESTRICTIONS.

- You may not sell copies of these educational materials in any form except to recover the minimum reproduction cost of electronic media or photocopy expense.
- You may not modify the wording or original intent of the educational material for commercial use.

THANK YOU

Continuing Lay Training would like to thank Clergy Development for granting permission to modify and adapt their course of study materials for our educational purposes. Their willingness to partner with us is sincerely appreciated.

Introduction to the Gospels

SESSION OVERVIEW

The Content of the Gospel

The Form of the Gospels

Why the Gospels Were Written

The Nature of the Gospels

From Oral Traditions to Written Gospels

The Trustworthiness of the Gospels

The Significance of Four Gospels

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand the genre and purpose of the Gospels.
- appreciate the trustworthiness of the Gospels.
- discover the core content of the Gospels.

Introduction to the Gospels



INTRODUCTION

The 27 books which make up the New Testament are of differing literary types. Included among these types are gospels, acts, epistles, and apocalyptic literature. The order in which the books appear has nothing to do with the date of their composition, but rather with their content. The Gospels appear first because of their telling of the story of Jesus.

The term gospel translates from the Greek word *euangelion* meaning good news. The term was not a Christian invention, but was often used in the Greco-Roman world to indicate good news of any sort, for example a military victory. In the New Testament, the term refers to the good news of salvation (Matt. 11:5; Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 15:1-2). Mark's story of Jesus begins with the words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (NRSV). Mark is clearly referring to good news and not to a literary work.

None of what we have in the New Testament was written during the life of Jesus. The earliest writings are those of Paul with the written Gospels appearing some thirty to fifty years after Jesus' death. Most scholars date the Gospels as follows: Mark 65-70, Matthew and Luke approximately 85, and John around 95. This observation takes us to the topic of oral tradition.

The earliest traditions and remembrances about Jesus were oral in nature. Jesus did not take it upon himself to compose sacred texts. In fact, Jesus and the early Christian communities had sacred texts in the scriptures of the Old Testament. Rather, Jesus invested His life in others, particularly in a close inner circle of His followers who would one day through the Spirit's power carry forth that which He had begun. All this occurred during a time and in a culture in which oral traditions were prized and treasured as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting those occurrences and ideas which were held to be of value for generations to come.

Oral traditions relating to the deeds and words of Jesus were abundant. At the close of John's gospel, it reads: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them was written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." The oral stories about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that were shared through preaching and teaching were passed on in numerous forms. These forms made remembering the sayings and events relating to Jesus' life easier.

In spite of the usefulness and widespread usage of oral traditions, the written Gospels were composed. What was the essential content of these Gospels? Why was it necessary to have them? What purpose do they serve? We will now explore these and other issues relating to the Gospels.

THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL



NOTES

Christianity did not arise in response to a book or a set of sacred texts. It arose in response to a person -- the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament witnesses to the living Christ who entered this world, ministered, suffered, died, was resurrected, ascended to the Father, poured out the Holy Spirit on His followers who were left behind, calls all persons to repentance and offers forgiveness, and is coming again. These items comprise the essence of the early Christian *kerygma* or proclamation. These items fill out the basic content early Christians preached. In *Encountering the New Testament*, Ewell and Yarbrough, summarize the *kerygma* as God's offer of salvation, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the call to faith in light of the coming judgment. The Apostles' Creed is an example of how the Church eventually summarized the *kerygma*. It declares:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
 Creator of Heaven and Earth.
 I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord
 He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
 and born of the Virgin Mary.
 He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
 was crucified, died, and was buried.
 He descended to the dead.
 On the third day he rose again.
 He ascended into heaven,
 and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
 I believe in the Holy Spirit,
 the holy catholic Church,
 the communion of the saints,
 the forgiveness of sins,
 the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
 Amen.

THE FORM OF THE GOSPELS



NOTES

In AD 155, Justin Martyr called the gospels memoirs. Scholars debate how the Gospels should be classified as to their form. It seems, the Gospels fit best into the ancient form of biography. If so, however, they are a new subdivision of this form. The Gospels certainly do not meet our expectations for reading the life story of some person of particular interest to us.

Modern biographies usually begin with and an account of the subject's childhood years, and progress consecutively through adolescence and adulthood to show how the mature person has developed in response to the various influences of early life and environment. They are generally very psychological, sociological, or show how particular cultural and historical settings influenced the development of the person they are writing about. The Gospels are very different from this.

Scholars have looked for some term other than history or biography to characterize the form or *genre* of the Gospels. Some have suggested aretalogies, Greco-Roman accounts of the life of a Greek hero who was usually the child of a god and a human virgin. Other scholars prefer the language of theater and refer to Gospels as dramas, comedies (having a good ending) or tragedies (usually ending in the death of the hero). Some emphasize the use of the Old Testament and characterize the gospels as *midrash* or commentaries on the Old Testament.

None of these suggestions account for the majority of the features of a Gospel. Blomberg writes: 'An increasing number of scholars, therefore, recognize that the list of traits setting the Gospels apart from modern biographies does not distinguish them nearly so much from *ancient* Greco-Roman biographies or Greek and Jewish 'historiography' (history-writing). Ancient writers were more highly selective, ideological, and artistic in narrating the great events of their day or the lives of key individuals.'

There are unique features of the Gospels, to be sure, generally related to the unique events they narrate and the distinctive nature of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But this makes them no less historical or biographical by the convention of their day. Perhaps it is best, then to refer to the Gospels as theological biographies. The four Gospels are primarily witnesses to Jesus. Their main emphasis is the last week of Jesus' life. This last week is prefaced by the reports of Jesus' teaching and accounts of a few events from the three years before His death. There is no real discussion of His childhood and adolescence, and especially on how these influenced what He became. The Gospels are testimonies to who Jesus was—from the very beginning of His life.

WHY THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN



NOTES

The authors of the Gospels were evangelists and were primarily concerned with delivering the message about Jesus to their contemporaries. If oral traditions about Jesus' life and teaching were so effective and useful in evangelism, teaching, encouragement, and worship in the early Christian Church (being valued as late as the second century AD), why then were written accounts produced? What led to the recognition of the need for written documents? There is no single answer to this question, but rather a variety of contributing factors.

- One of the key motivating factors appears to have driven much of what occurred in early Christian communities was the belief in the soon coming of Christ. As the first century progressed, it became increasingly clear that this coming may be longer than expected. In time, a need for written authoritative traditions about Jesus was recognized.
- As the first century advanced, the original witnesses to the historical Jesus' life and message began to die. There was a need to preserve certain memories and experiences. In addition, these eye-witnesses had to provide a safeguard to the traditions themselves.
- Written documents proved useful for teaching and evangelism as the Church continued to expand throughout the Greco-Roman world. Teachings of Jesus were brought together to respond to questions about who Jesus was and the nature of His ministry.

THE NATURE OF THE GOSPELS



NOTES

THE GOSPELS ARE SELECTIVE ACCOUNTS

Incidents in Jesus' life are used as appropriate illustrations to explain theological points. They incorporate incidents heard in the preaching of apostles. For instance, Papias, an Early Church father, claims Mark's Gospel is taken from the preaching of Peter. Some of the details we would like to know (i.e., details of His childhood, what He looked like) are not relevant to winning other people to faith in their Lord. So the Gospel writers did not include them.

EACH STORY IS TOLD FOR A REASON

Generally, we refer to this reason as the theological content or perspective of the writer. To understand the stories, we must always try to relate them to the purpose of the author (Evangelist) or to the theology of the author. Each of the Evangelists was addressing different audiences that were located in various historical and cultural settings. They were speaking to the distinctive needs of those communities. As such, each author presents a somewhat distinctive picture of Jesus that contributes to our overall understanding of Him.

Because the Gospel accounts are selective accounts, we can discover some things about the author and audience, by comparing what they have selected as important with the other Gospels, especially Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three Gospels tell the story of Jesus in roughly the same order and repeat large sections of material found in the others.

How do the writers themselves describe what they are doing?

- Mark 1:1: "The Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ." This is the first stage in the development of the message. This story was an integral and important part of Mark's own experience as a Christian. It was the first stage in the development of the message to which he and others had responded and committed their lives.
- Luke 1:3-4: "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." Luke writes so his readers may know the trustworthiness and full implications of the Christian message they had heard so often.

 **NOTES**

- John 20:30-31: “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.” John gives us the story of Jesus so we might believe and have life!
- Matthew is not so direct in telling us why he is writing. He begins: “A record of the genealogy of the Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). Later on in this chapter he says, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about” (1:18). His apparent reason is to give a detailed and accurate account of the life of Jesus for a Jewish Christian audience. This brings out the important point that when these Gospels were being written the eyewitnesses were beginning to die and the Church was exploding in growth. The best way to get the accurate story of Jesus out to the most people was to put it in written form.

FROM ORAL TRADITIONS TO WRITTEN GOSPELS



NOTES

Granting that the need for written sources was recognized, questions remain concerning the development of the Gospels themselves. Some insights into the process of going from oral traditions to written gospels derive from the introduction to Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) which reads:

"Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed" (NRSV).

In these verses, we see three items in the development of Luke's Gospel.

- First, Luke indicates his reliance upon a body of tradition from "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (v. 2). The exact degree of Luke's dependence on these traditions is uncertain. In any event, it seems certain that eyewitness reports to the words and deeds of Jesus provided a foundation for the stories of Jesus' life and ministry as found in the Gospels. These traditions were oral in nature and were passed on in different forms (parables, miracle stories, etc.).
- Second, we are made aware of many others whom Luke acknowledges for attempting to fashion or develop a narrative out of the traditions that were available to them (v. 1). Little is known of these others with one exception. Luke seems to have been aware of the gospel of Mark as one source.
- And third, the development of Luke's Gospel involved his own contribution as he investigated everything carefully from the first to provide an orderly account of Jesus' life and ministry. Luke's stated purpose is to provide Theophilus with assurance that the truth he has embraced about Jesus rests on a firm foundation. In so doing, Luke lays claim to authority that is based partly on the work of his predecessors and part on the basis of his own research and understanding.
- In these three items, we see a reliance on historical traditions from eyewitnesses and servants of the word, an awareness of others work in attempting to develop a narrative out of available traditions, and Luke's own treatment of traditions and resources in the composition of his Gospel.

THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE GOSPELS

NOTES

In considering the trustworthiness of any historical narrative, the issue of sources is extremely important. In our culture, it seems that one after another new or newly discovered portrait of Jesus comes to have much media attention. As these new or rediscovered pictures of Jesus are considered that issue of sources should always be in our minds. This is a legitimate issue as we come to the Gospels as well. Where did the evangelists get their information? What were their sources?

- Accounts from living eyewitnesses
- Old Testament Texts: *testimonia*. These are lists of Old Testament passages the Messiah would fulfill when He came. The people of Qumran kept such lists and so did other Jewish groups. Matthew, John, and Paul use Old Testament quotations extensively. It may be that collecting the passages was one of the earliest literary activities in the Christian Church. They were assembled for the convenience of Christian preachers to support their claim that Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament promises concerning the Messiah.
- Words of Jesus: *logia*. These are collections of sayings of Jesus. They were collected for different purposes and occasions. There were probably several different collections used in different areas of the Roman Empire. We have some later collections such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, which was written in Egypt in the Coptic language in the second or third century AD. And we have references—to other works, which do not exist today—that refer to collections of the sayings of Jesus such as Papias' *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord*. Around AD 130-140 Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, wrote this five-volume book, where he says he has compiled the *logia* in the Hebrew language.
- *Logia "Q"*. Matthew and Luke have large sections of the teachings of Jesus which are absent in Mark. Matthew and Luke had access to a *logia* Mark did not. Scholars call the *logia* "Q" coming from the German word *quelle* that means source. A debate has long been whether Q was an oral or written source. Scholars are divided on this, but many lean toward a written document that circulated among the early Christians.

In the fall of 1999, Claremont Graduate University, under the direction of James M. Robinson, published the results of a long-term project in the reconstruction of this collection of sayings. John Kloppenbergh has also published results of this

**NOTES**

reconstruction. These reconstructions are based on comparisons of the teaching materials in the Canonical Gospels, Gospel of Thomas, and other literature of the first and second centuries. Both Robinson and Kloppenborg believe there was a written document containing the sayings of Jesus that has not yet been discovered.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FOUR GOSPELS



NOTES

Perhaps, life would be simpler if we only had one gospel instead of four. Then we would not have to worry about literary relationships and similarities and differences among the Gospels. Some attempts were made in the early church to have only one version of the life of Jesus. Attempts were made by such persons as Marcion and Tatian. Tatian attempted to harmonize the Gospels by weaving all four into a harmonious account. His work was known as the Diatessaron. However, all attempts at harmonization failed and never met widespread acceptance in the church. While recognizing differences in the Gospels, the Early Church recognized that each Gospel contributed in a distinctive way to an understanding of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection.

The diverse pictures of Jesus provided by the four Gospels were recognized as a strength rather than a weakness. The wisdom of the Church is evidenced by an examination of the distinctive themes, points of emphasis, and characteristics of the four Gospels. Each makes a major contribution to our picture of Jesus Christ. This will become evident as we survey each of the Gospels.

APPLICATION



NOTES

Read the following passages. List the key findings about Jesus' life, message, and the significance of that message. What is recurring and what is not covered about the story of Jesus?

- Acts 10:34-43
- Acts 2:22-28
- Acts 2:29-36
- Acts 3:17-26
- Acts 4:8-12
- Acts 5:29-32
- Acts 7:44-53
- Acts 13:21-31
- Acts 13:32-41
- 1 Cor. 15:3-7

Read Matt. 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-47; John 2:13-22. Compare and contrast the accounts of Jesus' Cleansing of the Temple. How do differences in detail contribute to the story?

EXAM



NOTES

1. The term gospel was developed and used by Christians to tell the unique story of Jesus' life and ministry.
 - A. True
 - B. False
2. Christianity arose in response to _____.
 - A. a set of sacred text or writings
 - B. discussions held by early church councils
 - C. human needs and desires
 - D. the person of Jesus Christ
3. The Gospels contain all the expected features of modern biographies.
 - A. True
 - B. False
4. Each of the following except the _____ was mentioned as relating to the composition of written Gospels.
 - A. need for authoritative traditions
 - B. death of eyewitnesses to Jesus
 - C. need for documents that could be helpful in teaching and evangelism
 - D. idea that only written traditions was reliable
5. The authors of the Gospels intended to provide readers with answers to all their questions about Jesus.
 - A. True
 - B. False
6. The Evangelists were writing to different audiences that were located in various historical and cultural settings.
 - A. True
 - B. False
7. Each of the Gospels provides the identical picture of Jesus.
 - A. True
 - B. False


NOTES

8. _____ is not so direct in telling us his reason for writing. He appears to have been writing with a Jewish Christian audience in mind.
- Matthew
 - Mark
 - Luke
 - John
9. In _____ Gospel, we are made aware of three items in the process of going from oral traditions to written Gospels.
- Matthew's
 - Mark's
 - Luke's
 - John's
10. _____ tells the reader that at the heart of his Gospel are the traditions of those who "from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word."
- Matthew
 - Mark
 - Luke
 - John
11. In consideration of any information about Jesus (or any other person in history), the issue of sources is of primary importance.
- True
 - False
12. Testimonia is a collection of sayings of Jesus.
- True
 - False
13. "Q" refers to large sections of Jesus' teachings that are _____.
- absent in Mark, but present in Luke
 - found only in the Gospel of John
 - located in Mark and Matthew, but not in Luke
 - present in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark
14. Early Christians insisted that the Gospels present a single picture of Jesus.
- True
 - False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. Why was it necessary to have written gospels? What purpose do they serve?
2. What terms would you use to describe the genre of the Gospels? Why?
3. What difference would it make if archeologists discovered a written document "Q" sometime in the future?