**New Testament Survey – Fall Semester**

October 1st, 2023

The Gospels

We begin our study of the New Testament with – expectedly – the Gospels. But it is both interesting and important to note that **the Gospels stand in prominence at the front of the New Testament, not because they were *written* first, but because the early church deemed them to be the very foundation of all of the rest of the New Testament writings**.

**The word 'gospel'** is derived from the old English word, 'god-spell,' which referred to *God's story.* The Greek word (*eu-angelion*) **meant 'the good news.'**

'Very early in the church age this general idea for good news took on the technical idea of *the good news about Jesus Christ and His marvelous salvation*. These first four books of the New Testament tell the story of Jesus Christ's salvation for lost man … referred to as the gospels.' Benware, p.44

Regarding the magnificence of the Gospels, one scholar noted,

'Although they are full of biographical material, they are really thematic portraits that almost entirely overlook the thirty plus years of preparation for Christ's relatively brief public ministry.… **In all, only about fifty days of Jesus ministry are touched upon in the combined Gospels** … a composite picture of the person and work of the Savior, working together to give depth and clarity to our understanding … **each gospel has a distinctive dimension to add**, so that the total is greater than the sum of the parts.' Wilkenson & Boa, p.303

**Matthew, Mark, and Luke are commonly referred to as the *Synoptic* Gospels**. The word, 'synoptic' is from the Greek compound, *sun*, *together*, and *opsis*, *view*. More literally defined as 'the general view of a whole,' **synoptic refers to the obvious parallels in the gospel narratives of the three writers**. More specifically, **they present a more common view of Christ's life than does John**. Together they present a blended view that is distinct from John's Gospel – although there are areas of overlap even with that account.

**The so-called Synoptic problem**

**The 'Synoptic problem,'** as Benware describes it, **'is the phrase used to describe the difficulty scholars have in dealing with the apparent interrelationship of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.'** (p.46) **In these three Gospels there are obvious 'resemblances and differences' one finds when comparing them**; differences which are at times so great as to seem contradictory. The so called **'problem' lies** not so much with the areas of 'resemblance' as **with the areas that are different or appear to disagree**. In an attempt to explain the similarities and differences, many suggestions have been entertained over the years. One author explains,

'The fact that there are different details and slight variations in describing the same incident makes the testimony of the various writers all the more trustworthy, for it precludes the possibility of pre-arranged collusion among them.' Unger’s, p.458

But **the differences are not insurmountable**, and the entire difficulty can be explained by the simple truth that **the Holy Spirit ultimately directed each writer** as to arrangement, style, and content. A reasonable solution to this problem is to understand that **each of the writers received direct knowledge from Christ's earthly ministry, supplementary material by way of oral tradition, the use of documentary material, and the careful oversight of the Holy Spirit**.

**The authors and explanations of their varied purposes**

'Matthew views Jesus as the King; Mark sees Him as the Servant of the Lord; Luke presents Jesus as Man; and John views Christ as God … Matthew was writing to the Jew; Mark's audience was the Roman; Luke addressed the Greek; and John was writing to the Christian Church.' Benware, p.44

One historian sought to balance this commonly held over-simplification,

'It might be more accurate to say that **all four were intended primarily for Christian believers.**' Eerdman, Matthew, p.8

**'The four Gospels are targeted to everyone so that Christ is manifested to all**. Matthew presents Christ as King to the Jews. Mark presents Him as Servant to the Romans. Luke as Man to the Greeks; and John as God to the whole world. In short, the four Gospels manifest that the message of Christ is universal.' Geisler, p.47

Another writer echoes,

'The four gospels, [were] ultimately intended for all mankind … While God inspired these men to write exactly what He wanted them to write, for the use of all mankind of all generations, yet they themselves must have had in mind the background of their immediate readers …' Unger, p.458

Benware summarizes,

**'The Gospels are four different views of Jesus Christ**. They are thematic presentations. Each of the authors approached Christ's life from his own viewpoint … selecting certain teachings and miracles.' p.45

**Four *perspectives* of the Good News of Jesus Christ**

**Matthew's** particular emphasis is Jesus as the Messiah who was clearly prophesied by God's prophets in the Old Testament.

**Mark** seems to place a particular emphasis on the Divine Power of Jesus. His miraculous works are especially in view.

**Luke,** on the other hand, focuses his attention on the Humanity of Jesus – Jesus as the Son of man.

Lastly, **John** writes to lead the unbeliever to faith, and to strengthen the believer's faith, by completing the record of the life of Jesus Christ.