

Four Voices, One Song

The New Testament Gospels

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Why Are There Four Gospels?

The word *gospel* means the good news about the salvation we have in Jesus. The Bible includes four books about this good news — *Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*. But why did God give us four books about the same story? Isn't that a bit redundant?

The life of Jesus is the greatest story ever told. It would be difficult for one person to catch and include all the details of the events, but with four books, we have a more comprehensive view. Each witness notices things that the others miss; and each witness has a different perspective, experience, personality, and interest. Thus, with four gospels, God has given us a colorful picture of the life of His Son.

Another way to view the four gospels is like four singers in a quartet — one sings melody, one sings bass, and the other two sing baritone and tenor. Each singer has his part, but together they make perfect harmony. The gospels are four voices, but one beautiful song.

Matthew

Matthew (whose name is also Levi) was one of Jesus' twelve disciples. Jesus changed his life, as he was a despised tax-collector for the Romans. Matthew included much more of Jesus' teaching than the others, which explains why his book is longer than the other gospels.

Matthew wrote his record of Jesus with Jewish people in mind, attempting to demonstrate that Jesus was (and is) Israel's long-awaited Messiah. For example, in his opening statement, he wrote, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham..." (*Matt. 1:1*). To open his book with Jesus' genealogy would've been very important to Jewish readers.

Throughout his book, Matthew referred to Jesus as the Son of David (*Matt. 9:27; 21:9*). He also included many of the Old Testament prophecies

that Jesus fulfilled. Matthew even ended his book with the Great Commission (*Matt. 28:19, 20*), a reference to God's promise to Abraham, that "his descendants would be a blessing to all nations" (*Gen. 12:3*). Because his book is aimed at the Jews, *Matthew* is a perfect transition between the Old and New Testaments.

Mark

While Mark (also called John Mark) was not one of Jesus' twelve disciples, he was a close friend and associate of Peter. In fact, Peter referred to Mark as "his son" (*1 Pet. 5:13*). When Peter was released from jail, he went to Mark's house in Jerusalem (*Acts 12:12*). Therefore, it is believed that Mark's book was really Peter's comments about his time with Jesus, which would explain why Mark's book has personal insights into Jesus' emotions, characteristics, and actions.

Mark was also the cousin of Barnabas (*Col. 4:10*), which explained why he tagged along with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (*Acts 13:13*). However, midway through the journey, Mark returned home to Jerusalem, which disappointed Paul (*15:38*). However, Paul later expressed his appreciation for Mark, so the two men must have reconciled (*2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24*).

Mark's gospel is the most concise. He moved quickly through the life of Christ, giving more attention to Jesus' actions than words. Mark wrote to a Gentile audience, probably Roman, as there are very few Jewish references, and when he did use Aramaic words, he interpreted them for the reader. He also used several Latin and Roman phrases. His emphasis throughout the book is portraying Jesus as the suffering servant. For example, he recorded, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (*Mark 10:45*).

Mark's claim to fame is his "Markan sandwich." He regularly wedged a secondary story between

two halves of his primary story. For example, Mark told the story of Jesus cursing a fig tree on the road to Jerusalem (*Mark 11:12-21*). Then, he paused to tell about Jesus cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem, only to return to the disciples discovering the fig tree had withered. His purpose was to help the reader see the connection between the primary and secondary stories.

Luke

Like Mark, Luke was not one of the twelve disciples. Rather he was a close associate and friend of the Apostle Paul. Luke's gospel was a work of a careful historian who investigated the story of Jesus and interviewed the eyewitnesses to write it all out in consecutive order (*Luke 1:1-4*). We believe that Luke was a Gentile and a physician (*Col. 4:14*) who also wrote the history of the church in the book of *Acts*. Both books were addressed to Theophilus, a Roman in high office, and he regularly used the pronoun "we" when referring to Paul's journeys, signifying that Luke was among the travelers.

Paul distinguished Luke from the Jews in his letter to the Colossians (*Luke 4:11, 14*), which means that Luke was the only Gentile author of the New Testament. Naturally, then, Luke's accounts of the story of Jesus and the Church were written with a Gentile audience in mind. As a result, he included several details that are not in the other gospels. As a physician, Luke focused on Jesus' healing of human ailments and diseases, as well as Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

The accounts of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke* are so similar in content, order, and style that they are known today as the Synoptic Gospels. The word *synoptic* means to provide a general view of the whole. We might also use the word *synopsis*. These three books do just that, provide a great overview of Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

However, the book of *John* is a very unique perspective of Jesus. His account stands out from the other gospels in several ways. Let's consider why.

John

John was not only one of Jesus' disciples, but he was also considered one of the three in Jesus' inner circle along with Peter and James (*Matt. 17*). In fact, John considered himself to be Jesus' favorite disciple. Several times in his book, he referred to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (*Jn. 19:26; 20:2, 21:7, 20*) or "the beloved disciple." He used these descriptions in his book rather than include his own name. He even referred to himself as "the disciple who leaned on Jesus at the Lord's Supper" (*Jn. 13:23*).

Besides these endearing nicknames, John was also the one to whom Jesus assigned care for His mother at the cross (*Jn. 19:26, 27*), a privilege that no other disciple enjoyed. Finally, it was rumored that John would not die for following Jesus after the Lord told Peter how he would suffer for Christ (*Jn. 21:18-23*). Although John was exiled to the island of Patmos for his role in leading the churches, even this could be viewed as special favor toward John.

Concerning his book, John's account stands out from the Synoptic Gospels. He emphasizes Jesus' deity more than the others. For example, rather than start the story at the birth of Christ, John opens with a glorious prologue about Jesus as the Word of God who came to dwell among men (*Jn. 1:1-14*). John wanted his readers to know that Jesus was the Son of God (*Jn. 20:28*) and the Savior of the world (*Jn. 4:42*).

Rather than focus on telling the general story of Jesus' life and teaching, John focused on the theology of Jesus, who He was and what He came to do. He was selective with the stories that he included, as each one points to some aspect of Jesus as the Messiah (*Jn. 20:30, 31*). For example, John highlighted Jesus' seven "I Am" statements, to indicate that He was (and is) the God of the Old Testament in the flesh (*Ex. 3:13, 14*). Jesus said, "I Am the bread of life" (*Jn. 6:48*). I Am the light of the world (*Jn. 8*). I Am the gate of the sheepfold (*Jn. 10:7*). I am the Good Shepherd (*Jn. 10:11*). I Am the resurrection and the life (*Jn. 11:25*). I Am the Way, the Truth, and the life (*Jn. 14:6*), and I Am the true vine (*Jn. 15:1*).