

“FROM MATTHEW’S POINT OF VIEW”

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

SESSION ONE – INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPELS

A study of the Gospels requires us to answer five preliminary questions:

1. Why were the Gospels written in the first place?
2. When were they written?
3. Who wrote them?
4. Why are there four Gospels, and not one, say, or seven?
5. How reliable are they?

1. Why were the Gospels written in the first place?

The question may seem obvious – we’ve always had the Gospels, and without them, we wouldn’t know anything about Jesus. But written documents were not the first and most important way to hear about Jesus.

The first way you heard about Jesus was encountering Jesus himself – in Galilee, say, or Jericho, or Jerusalem. We know he spoke to crowds of thousands. Even so, you would get only a glimpse of Jesus, or a small portion of his whole story.

The second way was to hear about Jesus through someone else who had encountered him, or had followed him, or had been taught by him. Even during Jesus’ lifetime, he commissioned groups of people to spread the Good News – first the Twelve Apostles, then a larger group:

Luke 9:1-6 (also Matthew 10; Mark 3:16-19) When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: “Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.” So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

Luke 10:1-12 (not found in Matthew or Mark) After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. 2 He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. 3 Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. 4 Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road...

Not all these disciples of Jesus remained faithful. John details a point of crisis (John 6:60-71): *On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”*

...66 From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. 67 “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

70 Then Jesus replied, “Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!” 71 (He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him.)

The Twelve “insider” disciples, whom we call the Apostles (“The Sent Ones”), remain with Jesus (with the exception of Judas) throughout his ministry, and are therefore the most important eyewitnesses, with the most complete story. Upon the death of Judas, the Apostles choose another to replace him; Peter outlines the qualifications (Acts 1:21-26):

...it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, 22 beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.”

23 So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen 25 to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.” 26 Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

The role of the Apostles was clear – to spread the word about Jesus. They faced a legal challenge from the Sanhedrin, outlined in Acts 5, but persisted. Here’s a selection from that story (Acts 5:17-42):

17 Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. 18 They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. 20 “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.”

21 At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people.

27 The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 28 “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

29 Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! 30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince (or Ruler, Leader) and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

...They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

As we can see from this passage, teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah was the Apostles' task. In Acts, they are the source of Christian teaching (*Acts 2:42 - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Acts 4:33 - With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all*). The apostles taught with **authority**, as those who were with Jesus from the beginning, and commissioned by him.

Paul, Peter, Jude and John – among other New Testament writers – recognised the importance of the eyewitness, Apostolic testimony:

Ephesians 2:19-21 - So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

2 Peter 3:2 - you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles.

Jude 17 - But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ

1 John 1:1-3 - 1 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

So the Apostles were the primary source of authoritative teaching regarding the words, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But there were two problems: the church was growing, and the Apostles were dying.

Christianity was spreading rapidly, numerically and geographically, and was becoming too large for the Apostles, the authoritative eye-witnesses of Jesus, to be able to share their testimony about Jesus first-hand to everyone who would hear. On top of that, the Apostles were dying, most often victims of violent persecution – James was beheaded, Peter crucified, Matthew run through with a spear. The voices of the Apostles, the testimony of the eyewitnesses, was being silenced.

This was a crisis, for in the ancient world, first-hand verbal testimony was considered far more valuable than written testimony. If you wanted the truth, you had to go to the source, or to a reliable second-hand verbal account of the source. In terms of the Christian faith, that was the job of the Apostles. Their job was to tell people what Jesus said and did. Nobody thought to write the sayings and teachings of Jesus down as he said them; that's not the way the ancient world worked or thought. You listened carefully to what your teacher or leader said, and then, having accurately committed it to memory, you repeated it to others.

So the Apostles travelled from town to town, city to city, country to country, and they shared the words and story of Jesus with all who would hear. The Apostles too had followers, and they too spread the story, although not with the same first-hand authority. But people could check up on these second-hand accounts by running them by the Apostles themselves.

Imagine this scenario: "Here's what Apollos told us about Jesus. And if you don't believe me, you can check it out with any of the Apostles you can find. I think Thomas is coming through next month." **Eyewitness testimony of the life and words of Jesus was the foundation upon which the church was built. The church wasn't built upon the Gospels; it was built upon the living, face-to-face verifiable testimony of the followers of Jesus.**

But then the Apostles started to die. People – in fact, the Apostles themselves – thought the return of Jesus would happen in their lifetime. They had no concept of the much longer timeline which God had in mind. They assumed that they would spread the message of Jesus personally, until – this year, next year – Jesus would return and bring the story to a close. But as the years passed, people realised that God might have a different time-frame in mind.

More disconcertingly, by the hand of antagonistic political or religious rulers the Apostles themselves began to be killed off. What if all the Apostles were to die before Jesus returned? How could the integrity of the Christian message be preserved? If I can't check with an Apostle to make sure what I've heard in a sermon is a true reflection of what Jesus said and did, how do I know someone isn't just making stuff up?

2. **When were they written? And,**
3. **Who wrote them?**

So, reluctantly, and as much as 25 years and more after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Apostles and their followers finally started writing stuff down. Mark was perhaps the first to realise the importance of this, and a fellow named Papias records what happened. This Papias, who lived from about 60 to 130 AD, had sought out and even known several of the early Christian leaders. He writes,

Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered... Mark made no mistake in thus writing things as he remembered them. For of

one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements.

The Gospel of Mark, then, as we've heard before, is really the Gospel of Peter, as collected and transcribed by his secretary Mark. A quick look at Mark's Gospel demonstrates how the stories follow Peter's time of involvement very closely. Additionally, many think Mark, being the shortest, is the earliest of the Gospels.

But Papias talks about the Gospel of Matthew, too. He says that Matthew "*collected the teachings of Jesus in a Hebrew dialect,*" – almost certainly Aramaic, the language Jesus would have spoken among his friends and followers – and then, Papias adds, "*every person translated and interpreted them as he is able.*"

The Gospel of Matthew, as we have it today, is the product of this collection of teachings – such as the Sermon on the Mount – and the subsequent translation and ordering by an interpreter – either a student of Matthew's in Antioch, where Matthew was based, or perhaps even Matthew himself, who, as a tax collector and therefore government employee, would have been fluent in the common Greek of the day.

Another early church witness, Irenaeus, writing in the 100s, narrows down the date of Matthew's Gospel: "*Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church.*" This puts Matthew's Aramaic collection in the late 50's or early 60's AD, and the Greek version in the mid-70's.

Why does Matthew come first in our New Testaments, if it is later than Mark? Well, among other reasons, it starts with a genealogy of Jesus, and then goes on to the birth of Jesus, while Mark begins when Peter met Jesus as an adult. It makes sense to start at the beginning, and the first line in Matthew in the original Greek language is, "*Biblos geneleos Iesou Christou*" – literally, "The Book of the Genesis of Jesus Christ." The first book of the Old Testament begins with the word, "Genesis." So does the first book of the New.

So that's Matthew and Mark. What about Luke? Luke himself, while not a direct eyewitness follower of Jesus, helpfully provides us with the reason for his Gospel, which relied heavily on eye-witness testimony, introducing his Gospel in this way:

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, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke wasn't himself an eyewitness, but relied upon eyewitness testimony to make sure he got it right. As a companion of the Apostle Paul, accompanying Paul on many a missionary journey far beyond the geographic scope of the Apostles, Luke saw the need for a reliable, well-ordered account of the life and teaching of Jesus, which could form the basis of belief for the new Christians forming the far-flung Gentile congregations. Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles as well, which tells the story of those early churches and focusses on the ministry of Paul. Acts ends somewhat abruptly while Paul is still alive; this dates Luke's Gospel to the early 60's AD, probably written while Paul was in prison, and Luke had the necessary time on his hands.

So, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are records of first-hand eyewitness testimony regarding the life and work of Jesus. They are intended to provide a firm foundation of truth, a ruler, a reliable guide, in the absence of the Apostles themselves, against which all other teaching might be judged. In fact, these three Gospels tell of Jesus in such similar order and ways, often word-for word, that they are called "The Synoptic Gospels," which means, 'to see the same way.'

The Gospel of John, written as much as 20 years after the others, adds to all these stories, supplementing them, filling in the blanks. He had outlived all the other Apostles, and was still going strong when the Gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke were in wide circulation. His Gospel sounds so very different than the others, because, as John's contemporary Clement of Rome wrote, "*John last of all, aware that the 'bodily' facts had been set forth in the other Gospels, yielded to the exhortations of his friends, and, divinely carried along by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.*"

The Gospels, then, are eyewitness, authoritative accounts of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, written to preserve the teaching of the Apostles and their direct experience of him. That there are four and not just one Gospel enriches and broadens our understanding of the recorded events, as each reveals the characteristics of both audience and author. **There were numerous other Gospels in circulation, but only in later years; these four were the ones deemed accurate and authoritative by the eyewitnesses and their direct descendants.** Their very reliability is why the church preserved, copied, distributed, and based their understanding upon them.

In effect, the Gospels fulfill the role of the Apostles in the post-Apostolic age.