

The Gospels

LESSON
ONE

Introduction to the Gospels Faculty Forum



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The Gospels

Lesson One: Introduction to the Gospels

Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Stephen Wellum
Dr. Ben Witherington III

Question 1:

Why did the gospel writers think it was important to record these facts in such careful literary accounts?

Everyone who's familiar with the New Testament Gospels should agree that they provide written — even literary — portraits of Jesus. They come to us mainly in the form of narrative stories about his life and ministry, and culminate in the events surrounding his death and resurrection. But why did the gospel writers think it was important to record these facts in such careful literary accounts?

Dr. Greg Perry

It's important that the Gospel record comes to us in the form of literature for several reasons. One is because as the time of the eye witnesses of the events of Jesus were beginning to die, those traditions were being passed along orally, and being formed into coherent traditions, but it's important to set that tradition and to fix it in terms of their accounts. And so, by setting it in literature it's able to sort of solidify and authorize the apostolic witness to the life of Jesus.

Question 2:

Are the Gospels only valuable because they contain facts about Jesus, or is it also important to consider their literary aspects?

Students and teachers of the Gospels should all be able to recognize that the Gospels are carefully written literature. But modern readers aren't always sure how our interpretations should be influenced by the literary qualities of the Gospels. Are the Gospels only valuable because they contain facts about Jesus, or is it also important to consider their literary aspects?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Literature is obviously the way that we understand God because God has given us a Bible to read. We couldn't have been on the scene when Jesus walked the earth. He

couldn't come back in every generation, so God appointed those who were eyewitnesses of what he did to write down what they saw and heard. And the other thing that's quite significant about the way in which the Gospels are structured is that they tell stories. They tell the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection which fits into God's great big story for the world and our future. And people love stories; people still respond well to the gospel accounts and they are stories that continue to engage people's thinking and there is a sense in which we're invited into the narrative so that we can hear from Jesus for ourselves and respond to him accordingly by looking at the literature that God has given us.

Question 3:

Why is it important to identify and consider the genre of the Gospels?

Realizing the importance of the literary aspects of the Gospels sets us on the road toward more responsible interpretation. But we won't get very far down that road until we identify the type or genre of literature we find in the Gospels. Why is it important to identify and consider the genre of the Gospels?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

Usually, when we read literature, we have some idea of what sort of literature we're reading, and that's what guides us as to how to read it and what we expect so that, for example, if you read an historical novel, you're not expecting it to be factual history, and you're not misled. Or if you were to read a volume of short stories and you know it's not a continuous novel, you don't read it in that way. So we really need to have some idea of what sort of literature we're reading and what kind of conventions of that literature are operating. And, of course, in the case of ancient literature, we may not be dealing with forms of literature that we're familiar with in daily life, and usually the literature we read from the contemporary world, we sort of instinctively know how to read it. We may have to think about that in the case of ancient literature. Say, for example, the Gospels. Most scholars now agree that the Gospels are a form of ancient biography. But they are a form of ancient biography and we mustn't necessarily assume that we're going to learn from them what we would learn from a typical modern biography. For example, they don't dwell on the development of Jesus' personality or features of his character like his sense of humor and things that often modern biographies are interested in. So, we need to understand the sort of literature they are.

Readers of the Gospels are often rather concerned, or sometimes rather concerned, when they find that events are in different orders in the different gospels. And if we know that this wasn't necessarily required in ancient biographies, you wouldn't necessarily arrange material chronologically. You may group material by subject rather than chronology. And we can see that, you know, this really isn't a problem in the Gospels. They're simply not necessarily following a strict chronological outline and would not be expected to.

Question 4:**Can we be certain that Jesus was a real, historical person?**

Just as it's important to understand what the Gospels intend to communicate, it's also important to believe what they intend to communicate. Evangelical Christians are committed to the idea that the Gospels are factual — that they are trustworthy records of the historical ministry of the very real person, Jesus Christ. But other modern scholars have questioned the historical reliability of the Gospels. A few have gone so far as to suggest that Jesus never even existed. Can we be certain that Jesus was a real, historical person?

Dr. Steven Cowan

The question sometimes gets asked whether Jesus was a real historical person. And yet, there are very, very few scholars who would doubt that Jesus was a real historical person. The vast majority of Bible scholars, even the most liberal of scholars, will grant that there really was a person named Jesus of Nazareth who lived and taught in and around Galilee and Jerusalem in the 1st century A.D. and who was crucified by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. And the reason why the vast majority of scholars are convinced of this is that the evidence for it is very, very strong. First of all, we have the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all of which tell the story of Jesus and which are at least semi-independent of each other. The Synoptics are interesting in that they have important relationship to each other — Matthew and Luke probably borrowed from Mark some of their material — but the Synoptic Gospels tell the story about Jesus. Luke himself begins his gospel by telling us that he wants to describe the history of what really happened about Jesus and what happened to him and through him. Then we have John's gospel, which everyone admits is independent. Paul talks about Jesus as a historical figure. So we have all of these divergent voices in the New Testament itself telling us about Jesus as a historical person.

But beyond that, we even have extra-biblical sources that mention Jesus as a historical person. We have, for example, the Roman historian Tacitus who speaks of Jesus as a person who lived in Galilee and was crucified by Pontius Pilate and who had a large following that believed he was raised from the dead. Tacitus doesn't believe that, but he definitely believes Jesus was a real person who had a following that believed that. We have Josephus, the Jewish historian, who lived in the first century and would have been a late contemporary of Jesus and his apostles, maybe a young man during that time anyway. And Josephus talks about this person called Jesus of Nazareth who preached that he was the Messiah who had a following that believed he was the Messiah, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and who his disciples believed had risen from the dead. So we have all of these divergent voices testifying to the fact that Jesus was a real historical person. And even beyond that, we can say that it's impossible to explain the origin of Christianity as a movement if there really never was any such person as Jesus.

Dr. Ben Witherington III

The basis of any historical inquiry is evidence — in this case, ancient evidence. We have canonical evidence. We have extracanonical evidence. We have evidence from Josephus. We have evidence from other early Christian sources that are not in the New Testament. We have evidence from the Roman historian Tacitus. We have evidence from Suetonius, and other Roman historians, so we have both biblical and extra biblical evidence that Jesus existed. In addition to that, we have epigraphic evidence; we have archeological evidence. For example, the James ossuary, the burial box of Jesus' brother, James, mentions Jesus. So there is both evidence direct and indirect, both literary and archeological.

Question 5:**How does the Holy Spirit's inspiration impact the Gospel's historical reliability?**

Most scholars across the theological spectrum teach that a real, historical Jesus existed. But Evangelical Christians also insist that the Gospels are fully and historically reliable, not just with regard to Jesus' existence, but with regard to everything they teach. And a central way we prove this is by pointing out that the Gospels were inspired by the Holy Spirit. How does the Holy Spirit's inspiration impact the Gospels' historical reliability?

Dr. Steven Tsoukalas

Assuming that the Bible is reliable, to use the old British term the “reliability” of the Bible, assuming that — and I don't merely assume that, I'll assume it right now, but there's lots that can be said for evidence that the Gospels, for example, are reliable — but assuming the reliability of the text, we are told that the Holy Spirit is God, and we are told that Scripture is God-breathed. We are told that prophets of old were moved by the Holy Spirit. We are told by Christ who tells his apostles that the Holy Spirit will recall things that I have said to you, bring them to your mind. The Holy Spirit's job, or part of his job, is to point us to Jesus, to point the apostles to Jesus, and to inspire them, therefore, in their writings, as if the Holy Spirit is using their life circumstances in real space and real time, using their personality that he created as God the Spirit, third person of the Trinity, and using all of that, and in his providence over events of the world, particularly in the ancient Near East at this time, to inspire them in their everyday circumstances to write to us about Christ and about the things he has done. So, there's a movement today known as — it's a philosophical hermeneutic movement — known as postmodernism, that basically states we cannot get at the intent of an ancient author. And a fruit of that can be what's called “reader response” — I read the text and I respond to it, and I create the meaning of the text. But if the Holy Spirit has inspired the Bible and he is God, he of course can insure that he will work through his community in interpreting the Bible as well. And this is one reason that I call the postmodernist movement, if it's adopted by Christian theologians, as implicitly atheistic or implicitly agnostic, and implicitly getting at in a negative way the character of God. If we can't get at the intent of the author, then that

means — let's push it back one more step — we can't get at the intent of God because God the Holy Spirit inspired the authors to write to us. He certainly can inspire us to learn the intent and to understand the intent of the text.

Question 6:

How should Evangelicals respond to the charge that the Gospels are based on faulty oral traditions?

Sadly, many modern scholars deny that the Gospels were inspired in a way that made them historically reliable. And much of this criticism stems from the belief that the Gospel authors weren't eyewitnesses, and that they relied on faulty oral traditions about the person and work of Jesus. How should Evangelicals respond to the charge that the Gospels are based on faulty oral traditions?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

Most twentieth century study of the Gospels was indebted to people who were the form critics who were working at the beginning of the twentieth century and who had certain very definite ideas about how the traditions of Jesus, the traditions of Jesus' teaching, the stories about Jesus, were transmitted orally until they reached the writers of the Gospels. And basically what they did was to imagine a period of oral transmission between the original eyewitnesses, who must have originated traditions about Jesus, and the writers of the Gospels — a period of oral transmission in which the sayings and the stories were transmitted from person to person within the early Christian communities. And they saw this as a potentially very creative process in which all kinds of developments of the tradition could have taken place, in which many of the contents of the Gospels were created by the early communities. And they also saw it as a sort of process in which the traditions were passed on anonymously. They weren't attributed to Peter or James or one of the eyewitnesses, but simply the communities kind of owned these traditions and passed them on. So there was a period, as it were, in which all sorts of things could have happened to the transmission. Many gospel scholars took that basic picture but argued that the transmission was fairly conservative, that the traditions were preserved fairly accurately, but others allowed all sorts of creative developments in that period of oral transmission.

Now I would say perhaps two main critical points about that picture of how the traditions were transmitted. One is, it seems to me, that the form critics ignored the very simple fact that the eyewitnesses who were there at the beginning of the transmission of the traditions were still there throughout the period when the traditions were circulating orally. So it wasn't as though, you know, these things happened independently. The eyewitnesses were there. They themselves continued to tell their stories and report the teachings of Jesus. They were the sort of authoritative guarantors to which one would go, really, if one wanted to know authoritatively the traditions about Jesus. And I think by the time that Mark, for example, is writing probably the first of the Gospels, it would be natural for a gospel writer to turn to the eyewitnesses who were still around to get his material for the gospel. So I think the

continuing role of the eyewitnesses who weren't simply superseded by this anonymous tradition is a very important fact.

The other thing that is well worth considering is that the form critics at the beginning of the twentieth century were working with probably the best models of all tradition that were around at the time. But we now know a great deal more about oral tradition. They were reliant mostly on the way that folk tales were transmitted in European history. And of course, these are the kind of thing that were passed down over centuries. It's a very different process, really, from the transmission of gospel traditions over a few decades in the New Testament period. Folk tales were also by definition fictional material, and people who passed on fictional material were often interested in creative development of it. They didn't feel bound to transmit material accurately. But we now know far more about oral tradition. We have studies of oral tradition from all societies all over the world, Africa and parts of Asia, and so forth — lots of data about how oral traditions work — and one of things we can say is... Actually, there is very little we can say about oral tradition in general. The way oral traditions are preserved and passed on and treated, there is very much from society to society. And we have to know something about the particular society. But what we do know is that if an oral society wants to preserve its traditions faithfully because it regards them as historical — and many oral societies do have a distinction between historical traditions and stories and will treat them differently — but if they have historical traditions that they want to preserve accurately, then they have ways of doing so. For example, they may have techniques of memorization so that sometimes things are memorized very closely and in detail. But also they would have people to whose care the preservation of traditions was committed. So traditions aren't necessarily, you know, at the mercy of how anybody might pass them on. There are people who are kind of authorized to preserve them. And we might — I think in terms of the Gospels in the early Christian communities — I mean we might well think of the eyewitnesses themselves as being the natural people who were entrusted with the preservation of the traditions. So, I think the form critics worked with a rather inappropriate and also very rigid model of oral tradition that we can't really now justify. We know a lot more about oral tradition, and there's no reason to think that it worked in the way the form critics proposed.

Question 7:

Are the opinions of modern historians more reliable than the gospel accounts?

The Gospels relied heavily on eyewitness testimony, and Matthew and John personally witnessed much of what they recorded. Even so, some critical scholars have tried to distinguish between the authentic teachings of Jesus contained in the Gospels, and supposed modifications and additions made by Christian oral tradition. These attempts are often referred to as part of the “quest for the historical Jesus.” But are these quests responsible? Are the opinions of modern historians more reliable than the gospel accounts?

Dr. Richard Bauckham

The question of the historical Jesus is, of course, what many gospel scholars have been doing since the early 19th century. And it really consists in an attempt to go back behind the four gospels. It presumes, I think, that the four gospels are not entirely reliable sources, or at least that they are heavily interpreted sources. In a sense, this is true, of course. The writers of the four gospels have their own views about who Jesus was and the significance of Jesus and so forth, and they are not writing simply a chronicle of facts. They are interpreting as all historians do. The idea behind the quest, I think, has often been that people want to, as it were, strip away all that interpretation and get back to the sort of bare facts of what happened in the history of Jesus. But the result, I think, of course, is what you get is a modern historian's interpretation of Jesus. We can never have bare facts, or the bare facts that we could have are simply not interesting. It's only when we think about the significance of the facts that they make history and make something interesting.

What I think we should be doing is not to try and strip away the interpretations of Jesus that we have in the four gospels, but rather, to recognize that there is a level of interpretation of Jesus that actually goes back to the eyewitnesses themselves who witnessed the events of Jesus' history, who were themselves involved participants in the events. And where is it modern people often suppose that if we get the testimony of some disinterested bystander, we'll have something much more reliable than if we have the testimony of people who were participants and involved and affected by the events. Ancient historians usually thought quite the opposite — and I think their point of view was better — that it's insiders who can really tell us most and give us the most interesting and reliable evidence. For one thing, if you are deeply affected by something, you will remember it much better than if you were simply a bystander who wasn't particularly involved. But also, you will have a sense of the significance of these events, which has come to you as you experience them. So I think what we have in the Gospels is the Jesus of testimony, by which I mean Jesus as these early eyewitnesses of Jesus told their stories. And we do have a blend of fact and interpretation, but we have a blend of fact and interpretation, which goes back to these involved participants.

So I think, actually, that is much more trustworthy than the views of some modern historian who has gone back behind the Gospels and really imposed his own interpretation. We never have facts without interpretation. If we don't have Mark's interpretation, if we don't have Peter's interpretation — that I think lies behind the Gospel of Mark — then we have some modern historian's interpretation. The idea that we can sort of, as it were, get outside interpretation is a mistake. So I think our approach should be not to try to get back behind the Gospels, but to study the accounts we have in the Gospels. And there are various reasons, of course. There are kinds of evidence that we can bring for relying on the Gospels, for supposing that they come from trustworthy sources. But in the end, we have the way these early companions of Jesus, people whose lives were transformed by Jesus, people who

were deeply influenced by the events and, therefore, wanted to tell everybody about them. What we have is those people's testimony to the events.

Question 8:

Why should the failures and shortcomings of the disciples increase our confidence in the gospel accounts?

There are many reasons to believe that the gospel accounts are historically reliable, and some of these reasons have to do with the actual content of the Gospels. One reason scholars sometimes highlight is that the Gospels often present the twelve disciples in an unfavorable light. But why should the failures and shortcomings of the disciples increase our confidence in the gospel accounts?

Dr. Dan Doriani

The Gospels do talk about the failures of the disciples to a remarkable degree, and it's really painful to watch how short they fall, and it could lead us to ask, "If these people are such failures, how can we trust what they wrote later on?" Let's first talk about why they failed. Reason number one, they're human. They are finite; they don't know everything they should know; they hear things; they don't remember them. Jesus tells them over and over again; they don't listen because it doesn't fit their grids. I don't know if you've ever tried to explain an American football play to somebody from anywhere else in the world; they just don't get it. And the idea that Jesus keeps telling them he's the Messiah who's going to the cross, well that fits none of their expectations. And they just don't know what to do with it. So they are "run of the mill" sinners, they don't like things that Jesus says, and so they ignore it or don't want to do it. But Jesus also was upsetting paradigms and expectations nonstop, and so they are also finite. We should have some compassion on them.

We can say that a very different way and say the disciples' failure represents the failure of all of us. We all fail, that's why Jesus had to come in the first place. They're like us; we're like them. And that actually gives us an interesting insight that, in the sense that, the failures of the disciples gives us a way into the Gospels. And you know when you read a book, when you watch a movie, therefore when you read the narrative of the Gospels you're looking for a hero. Who can I, with whom can I identify? Well, I want to identify with Jesus, but gee, he can raise the dead, I can't do that, I can't identify with him. Well, how about the adversaries, the Pharisees, the scribes? No, no one wants to be like that. How about the crowds, those fickle knuckleheads following Jesus at one minute, seeming to drift away for no particular reason; no we're not like that. Who's left? Well, the disciples. And, "hey, that's me," we can say. "I'm trying to follow Jesus, but it's difficult." "I'm trying to follow Jesus but I'm in the dark." "I'm trying to follow Jesus but I get frightened." Maybe the most important thing is to ask the question not, "Do the disciples fail?" but "What happens after they fail?" And to draw the distinction which is maybe sharpest in the case of Judas and Peter. You could say, although we don't like to say it, that Judas and Peter betrayed Jesus almost identically at the end. Now Peter didn't get any

money out of it. Judas betrayed Jesus for money. Peter betrayed Jesus to save his skin. Because a *paidiske*, a servant girl, twelve or thirteen, maybe eleven years old said, “You aren’t one of his disciples, are you?” And somehow, maybe he was ready to die for Jesus an hour or two earlier, but now this little servant girl walks up and says, “You aren’t one of them?” Somebody here presses a little further and he melts under the pressure of this, you know, girl asking him questions. Boy, can we identify with that. We’re so strong one moment, so weak the next. We’ll either die for Jesus today, telling a petty lie to cover up some mistake we made the next day. The question then is, “What’s next?” Well, Judas despaired, and hung himself. He felt remorse, but he didn’t turn to God for healing. Peter repented. And when Jesus came to Peter to restore him — “Do you love me, will you feed my sheep?” “Yes, you know that I love you” — took the charge, was forgiven, and on he goes. That’s what counts. Not the question, “Did they fail?” We all fail. Question is, “What happens after you fail?”

Dr. Mark Strauss

Students are often disturbed by the fact that the disciples seem to come off so bad in the Gospels, and particularly in the Gospel of Mark, I think they probably look the worst in the Gospel of Mark. And I think there’s two key points that we can draw from that. The first is that we have to realize these gospels were written at a time when the disciples, when the apostles were heroes, were viewed as heroes of the faith. So if they present them poorly, it’s because they are recording actual historical events. This is the way it happened and the apostles are not glossing over what actually happened. They are acknowledging that they failed in a lot of ways. We would expect them to be glorified, to be great heroes, if this was something the early church was creating instead of what actually happened. So that’s one thing, I think we have an accurate historical portrayal of the disciples. The other thing, however, is we have to realize for the gospel writers the real hero of the gospel story is Jesus and Jesus alone. Take Mark’s gospel, much of Mark’s gospel is about discipleship. It really is, “what is the role of a disciple of Jesus Christ?” But in Mark’s gospel there really is only one true disciple. There’s only one person, in other words, who follows God’s purpose and plan, and perseveres to the end and succeeds, if you will, and that is Jesus Christ. He says, “If you want to follow me,” he says to his disciples, “You have to take up your cross and follow me.” There’s only one person who take up the cross in the Gospel of Mark and that is Jesus himself. So, we look to Christ. We don’t look to human examples because he is our ultimate model. He is the ultimate disciple, the one who wholly did the will of the Father.

Question 9:

How can extra-biblical accounts confirm the reliability of the Gospels?

The historical reliability of the gospel accounts is corroborated by extra-biblical sources, such as the writings of other ancient historians. Of course, not all extra-biblical ancient historians were trustworthy, and none of them were inspired by the

Holy Spirit like the writers of Scripture. So, how can extra-biblical accounts confirm the reliability of the Gospels?**Dr. David Redelings**

I think when we think of confirming sources as reliable, we — from a historical perspective — we need to confirm them in terms of sources, first of all, which we do already trust. And so, for example, that works, it ends up working out that we usually want to work backwards in time, from the present. If we go back, for example, to the 4th century, it's pretty much acknowledged on all hands, that, by everyone, that there was a Christian church at the time of Constantine. And we know also that in the same period we have Christians, for example Eusebius or Augustine, and we have their writings. And in their writings we have, and many others as well — I mean, we have just volumes of Christian writers from the 4th century — and in their writings we have reference to other earlier authors. So, for example, Eusebius, who was a church historian in the early 4th century, he claims to have access to libraries, Christian libraries in Palestine, and he, in his work, in his Church History for example, he quotes directly, word for word, from many earlier Christian authors. So, we know that there are other earlier Christian authors, and we, we actually even have their writings, and we can actually cross-check them with Eusebius's excerpts. So, we have authors such as Clement and Ignatius and Polycarp and Justin Martyr and Irenaeus among Christian writers. And beyond that we have even secular writers who make mention of early Christians, such as Pliny. And we have the Jewish historian Josephus who gives, for example, some very interesting information about John the Baptist. As well as, I think, James, a follower of Jesus who is executed in Jerusalem shortly before the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. And so, we have a lot of sources outside of the Bible.

But one of the things that's often forgotten when we look at the reliability of the Gospels, or look for corroboration outside of them, is that the New Testament is actually not a single book but is a collection of books. In fact, the New Testament was really not collected in the form we have it for several hundred years. You didn't normally see New Testaments being the collection of books we have, but you would see the books circulated independently. They were written by independent authors at different times and only later collected. And so, all of the books after the Gospels, the letters of Paul and so on, are themselves independent corroboration of the Christian faith as it began. They, of course, don't say everything that happened in the Gospels, but they do tell some of the outlines, faith in Christ, and they tell us things about the early Christians.

And I think the other thing that's important to say about this question is there's often an assumption that we can't take the Gospels themselves at all seriously as testimony of what happened. And I think there's a, it's a problem of historical method to assume that we could take any work, modern or ancient, which has, say, a controversial character whether that's religious or whether it's political, and simply discount that entire source as a genre. So, for example, in modern times we wouldn't discount reports from a certain political party on some convention that they had, simply because they were the source of their own convention. And this is the same sort of

attitude that courts would take. Courts don't assume witnesses are correct, but they sort of give them the benefit of the doubt, saying, they deserve to be heard, and they deserve to have the evidence which they offer considered and evaluated critically — evaluated critically, but evaluated — and to be accepted if the testimony is reasonable. And so, I think that it's important to recognize that the Gospels are asking for the same thing from us, to accept them as testimony, to consider their claims, because of course you can never really have any testimony entirely duplicated by somebody else, and that's the nature of testimony, is that it asks to be considered. And I think that's what the evangelists are asking for from their readers.

Question 10:

How can we discuss the historical reliability of the Gospels with skeptics and unbelievers?

Christians have many reasons to affirm the historical reliability of the Bible including things like its inspiration by the Holy Spirit, its eyewitness testimony, its honest treatment of its subjects and characters and extra-biblical corroboration. But what about people who don't believe in inspiration and think the Bible resembles every other ancient religious writing? How can we discuss the historical reliability of the Gospels with skeptics and unbelievers?

Dr. Dan Doriani

There are a lot of reasons for believing that the Gospels are reliable, inspired, and have the facts, we might say, straight. And I like to say it in a fashion, if possible, that would appeal to a person who might be a skeptic or an agnostic, someone who might not be inclined to believe that God exists necessarily, or that, "maybe there's a God, but, who can be sure how he would work in the lives of these particular men?" So I'm going to give you a few reasons, maybe even ten reasons for believing that the Gospels are authentic. Number one: in the ancient world people learned by memorizing. A disciple of a rabbi memorized the key statements that they made. That's why you have Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but especially Matthew, Mark and Luke, showing immense diversity in wording when they're in a narrative, but suddenly the wording gets much more similar, in fact, often identical when we're recording the words of Jesus. They memorized it. That was their job; they had that skill. They weren't made lazy by reference works. They worked hard at memorizing.

It's also true that at that time the disciples weren't just ignoramuses writing. If you look at their Greek, especially in the case of Luke, it's pretty sophisticated. John has some very sophisticated methodology, although maybe his vocabulary and sentence structure is pretty simple. And Mark is fiendishly clever in the way he puts some things together and so forth. They're sophisticated. They're educated, maybe not educated in the sense of university education, but they're educated men. And people knew there were standards about the way you wrote things up. You had to give the epitome of events, you might be giving a very shortened version of what a general said or what happened on the battlefield, but you couldn't make it up. And if you did

you were discredited. You were discredited in part by the fact, maybe this is number three, that there were eye witnesses around. I mean, imagine if you would that the gospel of Luke is traveling around or the Gospel of Mark is traveling around and they say, “Well in this city so and so was healed,” then they name Jairus’ daughter in the Transjordan. And then the gospel gets there and they say, “Well, there was never anybody named Jairus who had a daughter who was raised from the dead. There were never blind beggars outside of Jericho. You know, there were never crippled people here and there; there was never a guy named Zacchaeus who came and climbed into a tree. “I’ve lived in Jericho my whole life; I never remember that.” I mean, if the Gospels got to these places — and Richard Bauckham wrote a wonderful book about this: *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* — and you know, names are named and places are specified. If those things didn’t happen in those places they would be instantly discredited. So, we can be sure that they are reliable.

It’s also true that people kept written records at that time. When paper was rare and expensive people still jotted down what their rabbis said. It’s also true that Jesus spoke, for example, in ways that make things very memorable. He used a lot of poetry, a lot of graphic sayings. How hard do you have to work at memorizing this: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away?” See, anybody can say that right back, because it’s so gripping, it’s so horrifying, and the truth of the matter is that probably over half of Jesus’ teachings have something in them that would make them easily memorable, that would make them stick in your mind. Of course, beyond that, the disciples were often teaching in each other’s presence. I don’t know about you but maybe you’ve, maybe you’ve talked, told a story — let’s do it this way — you’ve told a story with four or five people around who were also there. And you say, “Well, as I recall...” and then somebody says, “No, no it wasn’t that way. Don’t you remember? He came five minutes after.” “Oh, of course, you’re right.” The fact that God inspires the Scripture does not mean that we can’t have means like one apostle helping the other apostle remember. And then of course there are some things that you couldn’t forget if you tried. I like to tell my students that I was once in police custody for murder. I did not do it. But it was memorable. In fact, I can remember pretty much every detail of those ten or twelve minutes in police custody with guns drawn, demanding my ID, which I couldn’t find, and who was with me, and what they said. Do you think you could forget if you saw Lazarus coming out of the tomb? If you tried, could you forget?

Maybe the most important thing that I can say, and there are many more reasons to believe the Gospels are reliable, there was a teaching center in Jerusalem. There were — this is an odd one, but I’ll say it anyway — there were topics that might have been very useful for Jesus to have addressed. Boy, would it have been useful if he had just uttered some clear Trinitarian formula. But you know, it was never put into his mouth. Boy, wouldn’t it have been useful if he had said something about whether a Gentile who’s married to another Gentile and marries living in Corinth or Rome should stay married to that person or not? Oh, it would have been so useful, would have headed off controversies. But you know what? They didn’t put words in Jesus’

mouth. It's remarkable how later controversies are not inserted, solutions to later controversies are not inserted into Jesus' mouth.

But maybe the most important things I can say is this: that the eyewitnesses sealed their testimony with their lives. You would think that before one of them was flogged, beaten, tossed into jail, crucified, just one of them would have said, "Oh by the way, you know, it's really just a story." They died for what they said. Now, of course, we all know that people die for lies all too often. The vast majority of all people who die for lies don't know they are lies. A tiny number of people will die for a lie that they know to be a lie if it gained them immense power or wealth or prestige during their lifetime. They got none of that. They were nobodies in this world, they were constantly on the run, they were impoverished, they sacrificed, they were beaten, and then they died. And not one of them recanted their testimony. So we can be pretty sure that it happened.

Question 11:

Why are the similarities and differences between the Synoptic Gospels considered problematic?

Each of the Gospels presents the historical facts of Jesus' life and ministry in different ways. The Gospel of John is normally set apart as being the most distinct. The other three — Matthew, Mark and Luke — are referred to as "synoptic," meaning that they "look alike." But even the Synoptic Gospels differ in a wide variety of ways. Scholars often refer to the fact that there are similarities and differences between the Synoptics as "the Synoptic problem." And this terminology raises an obvious question: Why are the similarities and differences between the Synoptic Gospels considered problematic?

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

The synoptic problem is language that we've developed as scholars to address the issue that actually goes way back into an earlier time of the church of recognizing that the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, both at the same time look very, very similar to each other, yet still have differences between them. The fourth gospel, the Gospel of John clearly has some differences of events that are told and even chronology of events, but it's, especially, the Synoptic problem concerns, the fact that there are both differences and similarities. And particularly what that raises is the question if one gospel writer is using one of the other evangelists, which is completely fine — in fact, Luke even references in the beginning of his gospel that he took account of other gospels that have been written — if that's happening, and they're using each other, why are there also differences? You see, the problem is not just that they are similar to each other, that would stand to reason based on whether the events are historical and even using each other, but why some similarities and why some differences? The answers within modern scholarship have been quite varied. Some people, in fact the majority of people, would probably say that Mark was the first gospel, and that the other evangelists, Matthew and Luke, used Mark,

and maybe some other source that they shared and then other unique sources that they add to their own. Those are the common kind of ways to explain the difference between the Gospels. But what's most interesting is that this issue of the Synoptic problem is really not just a modern issue. At least back to the time of Augustine, St. Augustine and Eusebius, both of them wrote whole books to explain why the Gospels were both similar to each other and different from each other, mostly in the context of defending them against attacks on Christianity in their own day. And this is indeed what we do as scholars today and lay people as well. We read the Gospels, recognizing their similarities and differences, yet we still believe that God has inspired them. And they've been inspired to write what is a true record, using other sources and also giving us their own theological interpretation of the events that occurred.

Question 12:

What's the value in having multiple gospels that say essentially the same thing?

Because the Synoptic Gospels are so similar in many ways, some Christians wonder why we need three of them. And for that matter, is John really that different from the Synoptics? What's the value in having multiple gospels that say essentially the same thing?

Dr. David Redelings

I think the importance of the three gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke typically is what people are thinking of — saying very similar things, is actually sometimes overlooked and is quite significant. One of the reasons it's important is that it actually authenticates in an important way that there was a widespread agreement among early Christians as to some of the basic teachings of Jesus, his identity and so on. Not only does it authenticate it, but — that this was actually a widespread, these were widespread beliefs of the Christian community — but also it gives us a little bit of focus on the importance of these particular elements. For example, if we look at the Gospel of John, at the end John says there are many other things could have been written about Jesus, and the whole world could be filled with the books. And we know that Luke says that he has looked at other sources, or he's aware of other sources; he talks about that in the introduction to his gospel. So, we know that there was a great deal of selectivity, and it's significant that three of the evangelists in particular would have had so much overlap in the material that they have chosen. This shows also the regard they had for that particular material, and it's also interesting that the actual words of Jesus in the text of the Gospels often varies less than the surrounding narrative, showing the respect that early Christians had given to the words of Christ.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

One of the beautiful things that God has given us in the fourfold witness of the Gospels is that in fact even though they overlap very much in their accounts,

especially the first three, Matthew, Mark and Luke, but John as well, the general story of Jesus overlaps so much, why do we need four or three in the case of Matthew, Mark and Luke? One of the beautiful things about that is that God has chosen to give us a very rich and diverse and full portrait, really a fourfold portrait, of who Jesus is. One analogy that's often used for this which is very helpful, is that if we were to make a painting or a picture of some sort of the New York City skyline and we did some in a medium of watercolor and another as a photograph and maybe do those at different times of day from different angles onto the city, having those four different ones might for some people initially cause confusion that there's four different accounts, or four different pictures, but quickly it becomes apparent that they are all representing the one same reality of the New York City skyline, but we are enriched to have different perspectives, different media, as it were, different vantage points and different representations of the one reality of the New York skyline. How much more for the Gospels? Any biography of a person deserves more than one — any great person deserves more than one perspective. When we are talking about the incarnate Son of God, God himself, who lived and walked and spoke the wisdom of God and performed the miracles of God, just one account would never do justice to all that he said and did. In fact the book of John ends with a similar comment doesn't it? John points out that even if the whole world were made of parchment and ink we could not ever account in full detail nor in full richness of all that Jesus said and did. And so we are blessed, we are blessed in the church to have this threefold witness of the Synoptic Gospels and the fourfold witness of the Gospels together rather than just having one jumbo gospel as it were.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

The four gospels in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are not just accidentally bound together. We believe that the Holy Spirit inspired each one of those gospels, the gospel writers, and indeed the Holy Spirit superintended the process of the New Testament coming together, so we have these four, authoritative, inerrant, infallible, absolutely trustworthy guides to who Jesus is, what Jesus said, and why it matters. You know, what's really interesting is that the Holy Spirit knew we needed four, and the four are not identical. But they are complimentary. They are presenting to us the same truths concerning Christ. They are not in any way in conflict. They are in every way in harmony, but it's like having a conversation about Jesus by the people who knew him best, and are authoritatively inspired to tell us who he is, what he said, and what he did. We need Matthew to tell us how exactly this fits within the context of the Old Testament. We need Luke, the historian, to come along and tell us, "this is how it happened" in sequential order. We need Mark to tell us, "here's what's most important — immediately, immediately, immediately this took place." And then we need John, this giant, majestic theological gospel to go, not just back to the virgin birth, not just back to Bethlehem, but back to the creation of the cosmos — "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What we have in these four gospels is all that we need. And all that we could hope for in terms of knowing who Jesus is. And we need all four. Not just one, not just two, not just three, all four.

Question 13:**Why is John's gospel so different from the Synoptic Gospels?**

Although we find many differences between the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John is by far the most distinct of the four New Testament gospels. It never contradicts the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. But much of its material is very different from the Synoptics. Why is John's gospel so different from the Synoptic Gospels?

Dr. Mark Strauss

Anyone reading through the four gospels is immediately struck by the fact that you have three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that look very similar to each other — many of the same stories, same basic structure in terms of the ministry of Jesus. Then you've got the fourth gospel, the Gospel of John that is radically different. In fact, ninety percent of John's gospel is unique to John. Contrast that with Mark's gospel. Ninety percent of Mark's gospel is included in either Matthew or Luke and so those three are very similar; John's gospel is very different. The simplest answer is, we don't really know why for certain John's gospel is different. Certainly it has something to do with the time at which John's gospel is written and also the purpose for which John's gospel is written. All four gospels have a unique purpose. John's gospel appears to be written fairly late in the 1st century, when the church was facing new challenges from the outside world, from their Jewish opponents, from their secular opponents as well. And those challenges were certainly related in one sense to the person of Jesus, who he was. The deity of Jesus was clearly under fire because John's gospel so strongly stresses that Jesus is, in fact, divine. The Synoptic Gospels, that's not a big issue because evidently it wasn't being challenged. The other thing is there is false teaching arising in the church, and so John's gospel seems to address that issue of false teaching. The other thing, the third thing, is that Jewish opponents, there really clearly has been a clear break by that time between the Christians and the Jews, a break we don't yet see really fully in the Synoptic Gospels, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And so those three factors would help to explain why John's gospel is written with its particular emphases. John draws on different stories. He's obviously using traditions that Synoptic Gospels did not use to prove who Jesus is and what he accomplished.

Question 14:**Should the lack of rigorous chronology in the Gospels pose a problem for modern readers?**

One feature that distinguishes the various gospels from each other is the fact that they don't always present the same events in the same order. This is largely because the gospel writers weren't always interested in maintaining a strict chronology. Should the lack of rigorous chronology in the Gospels pose a problem for modern readers?

Dr. David Bauer

The fact that our gospels are not all chronological, or consistently chronological, can create problems for modern readers. This has to do really with the genre of the gospel, what kind of book the Gospels are. There's been a good bit of scholarly debate about that over the past century or century and a half. But there is a general consensus, which I think is quite true, that our Gospels are in the form of ancient biographies. And one of the differences between ancient biographies and modern biographies is that ancient biographies were written with a much more explicit point of view that is reflected in the way the books are put together. So, whereas modern biographies are characterized by very consistent chronological sequence, there was the possibility available to ancient writers, when they composed their biographies, to work more topically in order to communicate the deeper significance of the person and the work that they were describing. We certainly have that in our Gospels. So, even in the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we find in that there are some chronological differences. This is especially the case between Matthew and Mark on the one hand and Luke on the other, but even if one compares Matthew and Mark, we see that some events are placed at different points in the story. Certainly some statements of Jesus are placed at different points in the story.

Dr. Peter Walker

The fact that the Gospels aren't straightforwardly chronological in their order can sometimes cause problems for people. I suppose especially if they're expecting a kind of video camera approach to Jesus' life and they expect the tape to be running, and we want to know exactly what happened, one thing after another. I think once we're more relaxed about that and realize that that would have been impossible, anyway, to convey, we're set free to be grateful for the gospel writers being selective; actually unedited footage of a video camera is very difficult for us to process. So instead, they have done the selection process, and they've gathered Jesus' life around certain themes. And that actually makes it much easier for us to access. So, I think we ought to be fairly relaxed about that, and we see this for example, when in Mark's gospel, for example, Mark will just convey vivid snapshots of all that Jesus did in one day in Mark 1, or in Mark 2-4 how he is... conquers disease and death and other enemies of God's people. So we know that they're being thematic to some extent, and I think we ought to be very relaxed about that and not be too bothered.

Dr. Mark Strauss

The Gospels are not meant to be chronological because really the gospel writers weren't intending to write biographies of Jesus. Their goal is not to give us a news report of the events of Jesus' life. They're far more interested in the significance of Jesus, the spiritual significance of Jesus, the role Jesus plays in bringing God's ultimate salvation, and so they will organize events topically. They'll organize events around certain key themes. They'll focus on what Jesus came to accomplish, rather than setting out this happened next, this happened next, this happened next, because as far as they're concerned, they are proclaiming good news. They are proclaiming the message of salvation and so the significance of who Jesus was is far more

important than what he had for breakfast and what he did after that. And so chronology is of much less significance for them than the significance of who Jesus was and what he accomplished.

Dr. Steven Cowan

In the four gospels we often encounter a phenomenon that the story seems to be told in a non-chronological fashion. For example, it is pretty clear that in Luke's gospel, Luke portrays Jesus traveling to Jerusalem in what is almost certainly not a chronological fashion because we're told at one point in Luke's gospel that Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem — he is determined to get there. Very soon after that, he is in Bethany, just a stone's throw away from Jerusalem, but the next chapter he's back in Galilee. So it is fairly evident that Luke's gospel is not portraying Jesus' story in a purely chronological fashion. But I don't think this should be of any real concern regarding the historicity of the text because historians both then and now often tell stories in a non-chronological fashion. I remember not too long ago reading a historical work about the founding fathers of America, and the author of the book starts out talking about John Adams and his life, but begins at the end of John Adams' life and tells a story about the events leading up to his death, but then goes back and tells the rest of John Adams' story in flashback — by doing various flashbacks. And historians do that kind of thing all the time. The fact that a story is not told chronologically is no indication that it is not historical. It's just a way of telling a story in an interesting way or focusing on certain themes and isolating certain events to pick out certain things the author thinks is important and putting an emphasis on those things.

Question 15:

Do the differences between the Gospels indicate that their authors disagreed with each other?

Because of the differences between the New Testament Gospels, many critical interpreters claim that the gospel writers actually disagreed with each other. Is this a valid objection? Do the differences between the Gospels indicate that their authors disagreed with each other?

Dr. Ben Witherington III

The issue here is, among other things, the limitations of a papyrus scroll. You can only get so many words and so many deeds into a small piece of papyrus and so we needed multiple gospels because there was much more to be said about Jesus. Indeed the end of the Gospel of John says, "There's not enough papyrus scrolls in the world to fill up all the words and deeds of Jesus." So, one of the things has to do with the volume of the material that would have been available. But the other thing has to do with the point of view, and each gospel writer has a slightly different point of view about Jesus — not in the sense that one thinks he's the Christ and another thinks he's not, but that they have different emphases about how to reveal that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and at the same time the Savior of the world. And so, they felt free

and they had the freedom under inspiration to emphasize different aspects and different portions of the ministry of Jesus, and different ways of framing the question and giving answers.

Question 16:

What did the Jews in Jesus' day expect the Messiah to do, and how did Jesus compare to those expectations?

Each gospel is trustworthy a portrait of Jesus representing the apostolic testimony about him. And one theme that is central to each of them is that Jesus was and continues to be the Christ, or Messiah. But in the 1st century, the claim that Jesus was the Christ was very complex, because there were several different conceptions of who the Christ would be and what he would do. So, in order for us to understand what the Gospels mean when they call Jesus the Christ, it's helpful to ask: What did the Jews in Jesus' day expect the Messiah to do, and how did Jesus compare to those expectations?

Dr. David Bauer

The question as to how Jesus' performance of his, and understanding of his, messiahship relates to Jewish expectations is a complicated one. For one thing, the Jews did not have a single expectation regarding the Messiah. They had various Jewish groups. Some scholars have actually talked about various Judaisms over against just Judaism, pure and simple. So, certainly there were various Jewish groups. One might even say, go so far as to say, various Judaisms, and each one had its own end-time or eschatological expectation, messianic expectation. Most of them did have some messianic expectation. For example, we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that the Qumran community expected two messiahs: one from the line of David, a Davidic or royal messiah, and a priestly, or Aaronic messiah. But most Jewish groups of the time anticipated a Messiah in the line of David.

The first clear and unambiguous reference to Messiah as an end-time deliverer in Jewish material is in the Psalms of Solomon, a pharisaic work produced around 50 B.C. Particularly in Psalms of Solomon 17 and 18, we have a picture of at least what was a view of the Messiah in that group, the group represented by that book, where the Messiah is actually presented as a human being, not a heavenly figure, but a human being, in the line of David, who exercises rule over Israel but especially gives military victory to Israel over its opponents and oppressors, especially, of course, over imperial Rome. Really, riding roughshod, acting very violently toward the nations of the world, and so that Israel would exercise political and military hegemony over the nations of the world, this was messianic expectation in that work, and one that was clearly rather popular at the time that Jesus walked in Palestine. Jesus clearly, of course, repudiates that understanding of Messiah.

Dr. Peter Walker

Jewish people have been expecting for some five- or six-hundred years someone to restore the kingdom to Israel. They haven't had a king and they haven't had their own independence, so there's a lot of tension in 1st century Palestine. When Jesus comes proclaiming the kingdom and hinting that he is the Messiah, they are really on tenterhooks to hear what he is saying. What were they expecting? Well, they were expecting someone perhaps who was going to restore the temple. There were doubts about whether the temple was really — now that it had been rebuilt by pagan King Herod the Great — whether that was really the temple that God intended. But more than that, they were longing for God to redeem Israel, to fulfill his promises that he'd made in the Old Testament. Where is God going to fulfill his promises? So, that's what they were particularly looking for. But by that they probably meant, "Well here we are, under Roman occupation. Surely if God is going to fulfill his promises, he's going to get rid of the Romans." And probably they were expecting political independence. What we have in the New Testament, then, is Jesus claiming that he is the Messiah, that he is the one who's going to restore the temple — but that actually he is going to be the true Temple — and also he is going to be the one who's going to bring in the kingdom, but actually it's not going to be a politically independent Jewish kingdom. Actually, it's going to be the news that Jesus Christ the King is Lord over the whole world. So, it's slightly different to what they expect, but it's a deeper fulfillment of what was promised.

Question 17:**Why did the gospel writers find it so remarkable that Peter specifically confessed Jesus to be the Christ?**

As modern Christians reading the New Testament, it seems obvious to most of us that Jesus was the Messiah or Christ. And we tend to think that Jesus' disciples should have been able to recognize this too. After all, they lived with and studied under him for years. So, why did the gospel writers find it so remarkable that Peter specifically confessed Jesus to be the Christ?

Dr. Mark Strauss

Peter's confession plays a pivotal role in the Gospels really, because it appears in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the three Synoptic Gospels. And the first half of all three gospels really focuses on Jesus' divine authority, the demonstration of his authority through his miracles, through his exorcisms, through his healings, through his nature miracles and through his teaching. And so Peter gets it and recognized that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, and then from that point on it really launches into the role of the Messiah, which is the suffering role. Having said that, Mark and Luke seem to place a slightly different emphasis on Peter's confession than Matthew does. In Mark and Luke all those miracles leading up to that point, apparently demonstrate for Peter, confirm for Peter, that Jesus is in fact the Christ; is in fact the Messiah. So he acknowledges that God has been at work through Jesus and recognizes, kind of in his humanity he recognizes, that Jesus is the Christ. Matthew, in what follows the

confession, the first thing Jesus says is, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.” So Matthew has a greater emphasis on the fact that this is a divine revelation through Jesus’ work, no doubt, through his signs of authority, but that Peter is only really getting it because God has revealed it to him. So that sense of divine revelation is more important it seems in Matthew’s gospel.

Question 18:

Why did the Messiah have to descend from David?

One major aspect of Jesus’s messianic role in each of the Gospels is that he came to be Israel’s king. Of course, Jesus didn’t fulfill all the expectations his contemporaries had for the messianic king. But each gospel writer assured his readers that Jesus really was the rightful heir to David’s throne in Jerusalem. For some modern readers, this is a little confusing. Why did the Messiah have to descend from David?

Dr. Stephen Wellum

Why did the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah have to be a descendant of David? The answer to that is rooted in God’s plan in terms of what he has promised. Ultimately, he has to be human — the last Adam. The New Testament picks that up. But in the plan of God, that humanity comes through a specific family, a specific nation, a specific tribe. Particularly, what I’m thinking of, there is Abraham’s family, the nation of Israel, the tribe of Judah, and particularly David’s line. That is where we have in terms of the Davidic covenant. 2 Samuel 7 makes promises to David as the representative of Israel, that it’s through his offspring, through his lineage, that God’s rule will come to this world. The Davidic king is presented as the one who will fulfill ultimately the Adamic role of ruling over the nations, carrying out the creation mandate that was given to each one of us. So, the Messiah in order to fulfill God’s plan has to be a descendant of David, has to fulfill God’s promises through the Davidic covenant to the nation of Israel, ultimately, in terms of God’s promise, all the way back to Genesis 3:15.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Normally when we think about the kingship of Christ, we think of that as something very exalted, high, up there because Jesus is now at the right hand of God the Father, and he is the King. But we must remember that Jesus was exalted in his kingship in his human nature. That’s to say, in his divine nature Jesus was always the King. He was always ruling as the sovereign over all things. But Jesus was given authority in heaven and earth in his human nature, and Jesus is the Son of David and therefore the one who represents the nation of Israel and the people of God. And the Son of David, like David himself, was a vassal king. He was a servant of the greater king, God the Father in heaven.

Question 19:**How can we reconcile Jesus' kingship with his commitment to suffering and dying?**

One fact that troubled many followers of Jesus was that he pursued his role as Christ in ways that seemed contrary to the behavior of an earthly king. He didn't claim political power. He didn't raise an army. He didn't try to overthrow the existing political power structures that ruled Israel. How can we reconcile Jesus' kingship with his commitment to suffering and dying?

Dr. Simon Vibert

With the benefit of hindsight, looking back at the predictions of the coming king, you can put together passages like Isaiah 53 which speak about a king who comes, but who also will suffer and who will die. And Jesus believed that he was doing that to pay the ransom price for human sin and that on the cross he would lay aside his majesty in order that he could atone for the sins of humankind. But of course, even that's not the end of the story because then Christ rose from the dead, and he was exalted to heaven, and now he occupies the place as King over all creation, and he will come back as judge of the living and the dead. And the Gospels explain to us that the King has indeed come, but actually he has chosen to lay aside some of that right and authority in order to pay the price of sin for humankind.

Question 20:**Do the Gospels teach that Jesus is fully God?**

Another fact that many of Jesus' contemporaries found troubling was his claim to divinity or deity. It's clear that the Gospels reveal Jesus' humanity. But do they also confirm his deity? Do the Gospels teach that Jesus is fully God?

Dr. Jeffrey Lowman

One question in New Testament studies is, "Do the Gospels teach that Christ is fully God?" That answer, of course, is "yes" and very clearly. For instance, in the Gospel of John, John begins his gospel unlike the other gospel writers. He begins with the person of Christ. John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God," and then very emphatically, "the Word was God." And of course we read in John 1:14, "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory of the only begotten, full of grace and truth." And so, John begins his gospel by telling us that Jesus is God. We see that also on the lips of Christ in the gospel of John. You have in John 10 where Christ says, "I and the Father are one." And it's interesting that there, Christ places himself before the Father, emphasizing his equality with the Father. And you have the many "I am" passages, the *ego eimi* passages, where Christ says, "I am the true vine," "I am the light of the world," or even that stunning passage in John 8 where it says, "before Abraham was, I am."

Dr. Steven Cowan

It is quite evident that the New Testament Gospels portray Jesus as fully God. John's gospel is the most clear in this regard. John begins the very first verse of his gospel saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," and then he skips down to verse 14, and he says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." He is talking about Jesus, and he is telling us that Jesus is God. And throughout John's gospel, this theme is reiterated in numerous ways where Jesus claims to be one with the Father. He tells the Pharisees in 8:58 that "before Abraham was born, I am," where he is clearly indicating that he is the same one who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, when God in the Old Testament, in the book of Exodus, "I am that I am." And that's why the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders picked up stones to kill him because they knew he was claiming to be divine. John's gospel is very, very clear on this score.

Even in the Synoptic Gospels, though, there are strong indications of Jesus' deity. For example, all three Synoptic Gospels tell us about Jesus' trial. And in Mark and Matthew in particular, we have Jesus appearing before Caiaphas the high priest, and Caiaphas asked him that question, "Are you the Messiah?" And Jesus says, "Yes, I am." And then he says, "and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven." Caiaphas then tears his robes and says, "What else do we need? He has committed blasphemy!" Well, why has he committed blasphemy? Well, because Jesus is quoting there from Daniel 7, where we see in Daniel 7 this character called the Ancient of Days, which is clearly Yahweh, clearly God, and then someone called the Son of Man makes his appearance before the Ancient of Days, and that Son of Man is then given by the Ancient of Days a kingdom and power and authority that will last forever, and all the nations of the world bow down to worship this Son of Man. This Son of Man in Daniel 7 is not a man. He is something more than a man. He is an incarnation of God himself. That is clear in Daniel's context. And so when Jesus tells Caiaphas, "You will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds of heaven," he is telling Caiaphas, "I am that Son of Man in Daniel 7, I am God in the flesh." And that is why Caiaphas gets so upset.

Question 21:**What was the central focus of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed?**

The Gospels indicate that Jesus' full humanity as David's heir, and full divinity as the ruler of the universe, relate closely to his role as Christ and to the "good news" or "gospel" he announced. But how? What was the central focus of the gospel that Jesus proclaimed?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. He announced the good news, and the gospel accounts speak about his coming to demonstrate the kingdom of God by acts and by calling together a band of faithful followers, but then they move on to the last seven days of his life which move towards Calvary and to the sacrifice that he made, so the

gospel accounts record Jesus as proclaiming the kingdom in both word and deed, the word being the announcement of the kingdom, and that his deeds actually being the ushering in of the kingdom through his saving death on the cross.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

When we open the Gospels and begin to read them there's one thing that may surprise us but is inevitably going to strike us and that is that what Jesus was preaching and teaching about and modeling was clearly the kingdom of God. There's no doubt from John the Baptist's preaching, which foreshadows Jesus to the very first words of Jesus — the kingdom of God is drawn near, or has drawn near, or the kingdom of heaven has drawn near — and then in all his teaching, “blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” all the parables about the kingdom of heaven, all the teaching, all the ways in which he shows himself to be the true Davidic king riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. All the manifest ways to make it very clear that the Gospels, the evangelists, the gospel writers, want us to clearly understand that Jesus' message, his whole life, was about the bringing, the restoration, of God's reign or God's kingdom.

The idea that Jesus preached primarily, or focused on in his preaching, on the Kingdom of God may at first strike us as a little odd, until we recognize that the major story of the Bible starting way back in creation itself, is to a message about the kingdom of God. Even though the language “kingdom of God” rarely if ever occurs in the Old Testament per se, the hope and the expectation and the vision that God is a ruling king, a good ruling king, from creation on, is clearly a major theme. And, in fact, in the prophets, becomes the major hope for a day coming when God will restore his reign through a Davidic Messiah, a Christ, an Anointed One. So when we get to the Gospels we really shouldn't be surprised that what Jesus is announcing and proclaiming is the kingdom of God. It's there. It's because it's a part of the whole message of the Bible, and it's in fact when you look beyond the Gospels into the Epistles, it's, in fact, what they are building upon and presupposing and teaching as well, and — I was going all the way to the book of Revelation — the hope is for the restoration of God's reign. So, we can see at the center point of history itself, in the center of the Bible, the Gospels which witness to Jesus' life and death and resurrection, we are not surprised to see that his message is the same message of the whole Bible. God's reign, God's kingdom is coming from heaven to earth, from creation to new creation.

Dr. Peter Walker

As we look back at Jesus' message, it's worth looking at his central proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. That's the first thing that Jesus said. And so, when we're asking, what was Jesus really on about, we must look there. It seems to me that that phrase, “the kingdom of God is at hand,” gives us a great clue. Jesus is claiming that with his arrival, God is now the coming King. So the first thing he's saying is, God is ruler, you need to bow to him, and you need to recognize his rule in your life, and you need to recognize his rule, through me, Jesus. But more than that, when we recognize that the kingdom of God was something, which in Old Testament hope they

were longing for God to bring in, we realize that Jesus is also saying, “I am the fulfillment of the Old Testament story.” So a very important part of Jesus’ teaching is, “I am the fulfillment, I am the expected answer to the problems that were there before.” And when we look back to find out what was that Old Testament story all about, well, some of their hopes were, yes, that God would bring a king, but they were also expecting God to redeem his people, so Jesus is saying, I’m the one who’s now going to redeem God’s people. When you think that in ancient Egypt the Israelites were rescued from Egypt and redeemed, what Jesus offering us is redemption, not from slavery in Egypt, but from what? Well, slavery to sin. When you look back into the Old Testament, you discover also a longing that God will fulfill his covenant, and this covenant is God’s plan to bless the entire world through Abraham’s descendants. And so, when Jesus comes and says, “I am the fulfillment of that,” then we’re getting the message that God is going to do through Jesus that which is going to overcome evil and is also going to bring all people everywhere into his kingdom. So that’s the central thing that Jesus is claiming. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

Question 22:

What are some ways that Jesus taught implicitly about the kingdom of God?

Jesus spoke frequently about the kingdom of God. In fact, it’s the most common subject of his teachings. But sometimes it can be hard for us to recognize the kingdom in his teachings because he didn’t always use the word “kingdom.” What are some ways that Jesus taught implicitly about the kingdom of God?

Dr. Wai-yee Ng (translation)

In the Bible, the Gospels often refer to the kingdom of God by using the phrase “the kingdom of God.” In fact, the phrase “the kingdom of God” appears frequently, especially in the Synoptic Gospels, because the Gospels reflect the emphasis on the kingdom of God established in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the Gospels also use related keywords or other descriptive phrases to talk about the kingdom. For example, the Gospel of John uses language like “eternal life,” and “believing in Jesus” to receive eternal life, to describe the salvation that God’s kingdom brings to us. So, God can give us revelation about the kingdom of God without explicitly naming it.

Question 23:

How might we summarize Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God?

Over the course of church history, the idea of the kingdom of God has sometimes caused disagreements. And many of these disagreements have been over its timing. Is the kingdom already here? Or is it coming in the future? Generally speaking, biblical scholars now believe that Jesus taught both ideas — that the kingdom is

already here, and that it's coming in the future. But what's the relationship between these ideas? How might we summarize Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God?

Dr. David Bauer

The reason some theologians say that the kingdom of God has come, but hasn't come in its fullness is — short answer — because that is what Jesus himself said. You find this, for example, in Matthew 4:17 and parallels — also, a parallel especially in Mark 1, a close parallel there — “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” That is a very ambiguous statement. And I think it's deliberately ambiguous. The Greek word, which happens to be *engiken*, is itself, in its root, ambiguous. It can mean “near,” in the sense of actually being here, or “near” in the sense of being very close and about to dawn. And then, the tense that is used, it's the perfect tense in Greek, actually intensifies the ambiguity of it, heightening the ambiguity between its being at hand in the sense of already here, or at hand in the sense of not yet here. This is played out in the Gospels where side by side in all the Synoptic Gospels you have statements by Jesus, which indicates that the kingdom of God has already come in his ministry. “If I, by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then you know the kingdom of God has come upon you,” Matthew 12. Luke has a very similar statement in his gospel. Luke says, “If I, by the finger of God cast out demons, then you know the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Jesus, of course, has been casting out demons all along, so that's a very clear statement, among many others in the Gospels, that the kingdom of God has in some sense come in the ministry of Jesus.

But then, alongside those statements in the Gospels are other ones that indicate the kingdom is isn't here yet at all. And so, the kingdom is described in those passages as yet to come. As a matter of fact, this is a point of the Lord's Prayer. Throughout this whole period, apparently, we are to pray “Thy kingdom come” — may thy kingdom come — “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” There is, then, this tension between the already and the not yet of the kingdom of God, which actually is a modification of Jewish expectations. In apocalyptic Judaism, all of reality was divided into two periods: the present evil age and the age to come. And the expectation there is that when God ushered in his end-time kingdom, the age to come, it would happen cataclysmically, suddenly, and absolutely. You move immediately from the period before the kingdom to the period of the kingdom, the age of the kingdom. But in the New Testament, you have what I've called the “elongation” of New Testament eschatology, so that the age of the kingdom, as was envisaged in apocalyptic Judaism, is subdivided now into two periods, the present, or the already of the kingdom of heaven and the not yet of the kingdom of heaven. I might mention too, though, that the fact that the kingdom of heaven, as Matthew calls it, or the kingdom of God, has already come in a sense is sure and certain indication, assurance really, that the kingdom will be consummated. Because once God has begun to usher in his kingdom there is no calling that back.

Dr. Dan Doriani

Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God is robust and complex. First of all, he will say different things about the presence of the kingdom; He will say the kingdom is near, the kingdom is at hand; sometimes he says the kingdom has arrived. It's near because it's about to burst into this world. Those are the first sort of statements. In a sense, when he even says it's near it's already come in part because of the signs here in the first proclamation has been made, but the miracles are going to come rolling out any day now and the crowds and the people repenting. So we're just on the cusp of the first manifestation of the kingdom. Later on he says the kingdom has arrived. He uses a word that means the journey's over. They didn't have trains in those days, but the train has pulled into the station, the plane has landed, the boat has pulled into the port, etc. It's arrived. It says that especially about casting out demons. "If I, by the finger of God cast out demons, then you know that the kingdom of heaven" — or the kingdom of God, it varies from gospel to gospel — "has come upon you" — or has arrived. It's here — "The fact that I'm casting out demons is the proof that I have the power over Satan, and I'm spoiling his realm." Of course it's also true that Jesus will also, will speak of the kingdom in the future tense as well. And so we're supposed to pray, "thy kingdom come." That is to say, "may it come." Well, if it's here, why should we pray that it would come more? And of course the answer is there are many things that are here and yet not here. When, for example, a couple is first beginning to feel they love each other we might say they have begun to love each other; their love has come in part and yet there is much more to come. It's going to grow deeper and richer. When you embark on a new job you say, well, I've arrived, I now am in this position that I was seeking. But you're just getting started, and you're going to grow so much deeper in wisdom and knowledge and training and experience and the fruit. So it's clearly possible, the Bible speaks both ways that the kingdom is here, and yet it is to come. We are going to drink again in the kingdom. We're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the kingdom. So it's both here and not here.

Now it's very important to consider what that means for us, in what sense should we pursue or seek the kingdom? How do we live as members of the kingdom? And, as always, there are several answers. One answer is, we submit to the King. We hear the good laws of the King. We follow Jesus' words. We imitate his deeds as he, in various ways, encourages us to do. We also live mindful of the fact that the King has put us — we are humble, we should be humble when we say this — has left us in charge of his kingdom. "What is man that you are mindful of him? You have put all things under his feet." And we are responsible to govern the world for God. That means, of course, that we must distinguish between, say, the kingdom and the church. The church is the focal point of the kingdom, it's the concentration point of the kingdom, it's the vanguard of the kingdom, it's the nursery of the kingdom, but it isn't the whole of the kingdom. The kingdom is manifest when we start Christian schools of any kind, that's an easy one. The kingdom is also manifest in ever-increasing circles through our life. The kingdom is manifest when we husbands and wives love our spouses, when we care for our children, when we bring some savor of Christ to our neighborhood, when we help inculcate warmth and caring, and somebody's sick and I bring them a meal and they are touched, and then before long

— this is the way my wife operates — whatever neighborhood we live in, she starts bringing people food when they are sick, when they are needy, when they are down, and then you know what? Food, within two, three, four, five years, food is going back and forth, and people are caring for each other the way they should.

And maybe most importantly in our workplaces. You work in the music industry. Your job is to make money by writing hits. It's not as easy to write hits that build people up, that maybe don't preach, but somehow reflect biblical morality. When you make cars your job is to make a profit for your corporation. When you design anything, when you put up building, when you sell advertising, no matter what you do you can do it in a way that is strictly serving yourself or your company, and exploiting or maybe indifferent to the people that you could be serving, or you could be mindful of your responsibility to bring the kingdom. We could ask this test question. When you get up in the morning, when you work throughout the day, are you answering the legitimate prayers of God's people — "Give us this day our daily bread"? Are you giving anybody their daily bread, are you giving them food, clothing, shelter, love, protection? Are you treating others as you would be treated? Does the King smile at you? Does Lord Jesus smile at you? Oh, you didn't execute your plan perfectly. But are you striving to live in a manner that's faithful to the King? And when I say in our daily work I do not mean simply our employment, the work for which we get paid, you may be paid or unpaid, you may be a volunteer, you make work in the home. But we're responsible to serve the King, the Lord Jesus in every sphere of life, beginning in the heart, visibly first in the church, and then in every sphere of life.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are reliable accounts of Jesus' life and teaching. The Holy Spirit inspired the gospel writers to record these accounts, and both biblical and extra-biblical sources attest to their trustworthiness. Although there are differences among the Gospels, these only serve to enrich their value. The Gospels are the greatest "good news" ever. They teach us about Jesus Christ and the coming of his kingdom. And they assure us that Jesus, our King and Savior, the Anointed One from David's line, has come to save us from sin and death, and to bring us life. And we should live every day in the assurance of that salvation.

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