

Harmony of the Gospels

Harmony versus Synopsis

Although we have come to use the terms in a rather interchangeable fashion, "harmonies" and "synopsis" are really not the same. Technically, a "harmony" refers to a literary work that has interwoven two or more sections of Scripture into a continuous narrative. In this way, the editors weave together the first four books of the New Testament into one continuous narrative.

A "synopsis" much like a parallel harmony, refers to work that set forth similar texts or accounts in parallel format, usually in a column arrangement. The key difference between the two is that the "harmony" only lists a given text once, whereas a "synopsis" may list it several times without the editors making a judgment as to where they think it best fits the flow of the Gospel.

The Distinctive Contributions of the Gospels

Matthew

Matthew is at once the most Jewish and the most universal of the Gospels. His Gospel is noteworthy in its use of the OT, containing more direct quotes and allusions than any of the others. At the same time it is the only Gospel to include the word "church" and it explains that the Great Commission includes everyone. It is written to people who are sympathetic to Jewish life. Yet it must explain how and why Christians have taken the message to non-Jewish cultures.

The writer carefully weaves his way through the minefield of accepting the Jewish religion that brought the world the Messiah, yet rejecting the narrow understanding of the Jews who rejected Him. The masterful way this occurs in his Gospel may be observed in the themes Matthew presents about Jesus and His predictions about the future of Christianity. Matthew is critical of Jewish life. Jesus confronted Jewish religious practices (6:5; 23:32-33) and Jewish intolerance of Christians (10:17; 23:34). The Jewish establishment will be judged (11:20-24; 22:8). Yet he affirms Jewish interpretations of the OT (5:21-33) and the validity of the Law (5:17-18).

Matthew balances particularism and universalism. He supports "kingdom theology," a distinctively Jewish expectation (4:23; 9:35; 24:14), using the word kingdom more than any other Gospel writer. Yet he includes global acknowledgement of the Jewish Messiah in the visit of the magi (2:1-12). He mentions the word "church" as though it were an established institution (16:19; 18:18). Further, while affirming the necessity of the kingdom, Matthew recalls Jesus' words about the worldwide impact of Jesus' ministry (8:11-12; 24:14; 28:19).

Matthew appears to be written in a setting that required explanation of Jesus as both Jewish and Christian. The Gospel is thoroughly Jewish in orientation. It is, simultaneously, thoroughly Christian in perspective. It maintains this balance by a Messianic theology that brings both theological and ethical tensions. Matthew and his readers are likely in a Jewish Messianic community, where there is both appreciation for Jewish heritage, hopes, and distinctives, and criticism for Jewish blindness, failures, and opposition to the spread of the Gospel.

Mark

Mark is the least Jewish and most Roman in perspective. This is evidenced by the specifically Roman characteristics of the book. Mark's presentation includes the relationship Jesus had to authority: He is both under authority and in authority. It includes short, quick events as the core of the book. The action orientation fits the Roman mentality well.

1

Mark begins with Jesus as an adult and ready for ministry. The Roman world had little place for genealogy. Mark translates some Aramaic phrases, presumably because they are foreign to the readers, and he alone includes Latin phrases.

Somewhat like Matthew, Mark also guides the reader through cultural tensions in his presentation of Jesus. Jesus is the Jewish Christ, yet it is the Roman centurion who provides the ultimate validation of Jesus as Son of God (16:39). For Mark, Jesus is less the storyteller and teacher, and more the activist. His power over the difficulties people face provides a needed understanding of His person.

Mark's presentation of Jesus differs from Matthew's and Luke's. It is written to connect with a non-Jewish audience so that they can identify with the gospel message.

Luke

Luke's presentation acknowledges the universal appeal of Jesus, the perfect human. His presentation stresses the logical extension of Jesus' work beyond its Jewish packaging to the whole world. Clearly Jesus envisioned a universal movement of faith. Jesus' ministry extended to outcasts, women, and non-Jews (1:53; 2:32; 3:12; 9:51-56). Theologically Luke gives great emphasis to the Holy Spirit. He attributes the work of Jesus and His apostles to God through the impulse of the Holy Spirit leading them into the world.

Beyond these characteristics, Luke writes with sensitivity to the questions Gentiles might ask. First, how do Christians relate to the Roman government? Luke writes that, although their founder was a condemned Roman criminal and their movement was not sanctioned by Rome, Christians were no threat to the government. Second, how does Christianity relate to Judaism? Luke carefully demonstrates that Christianity was the fulfillment of Judaism that, once fulfilled, could indeed embrace the people of the world.

Third, how did Jesus relate to Jewish leaders? Luke explains that, although Christians are not accepted into synagogues and into the inner circles of Judaism, it was the Jews who failed to embrace the role as those through whom God would bless all nations. Christians exemplify God's heart for all people. Fourth, did God really expect that Christians would be His way of reaching the world? Luke attributes the spread of the gospel to God through the Holy Spirit. This is no afterthought. Christianity was the plan of God from the beginning.

Luke's presentation is to demonstrate to non-Jews that the gospel was applicable to everyone in the world.

John

The Gospel of John enjoys almost unanimous acclaim as "the universal Gospel." It, perhaps more than the others, is the Gospel most people can readily understand. The message is alive and simple. The Greek of the Gospel can be read by beginning Greek students, and yet the most sophisticated thinkers ponder the depth of its thought. Interpreters have debated its audience, including Greek, Gnostic, Alexandrian, and Rabbinic readers. Such scholarly latitudes reinforce the universal applicability of the Gospel of John.

Although utilizing the simplest of Greek language in writing, John carefully constructed his portrayal of Jesus. Clearly the purpose of writing is John 20:30-31. John crafts his writing to demonstrate that "the Christ is Jesus, the Son of God" (the most likely translation, which also suggests a Jewish context). He carries his readers to that point by an extended presentation of Jesus' public ministry, often called The Book of Signs (1-12), followed by an intimate conversation of one night in The Book of Discourse (13-17). The former consists of the interrelationships of seven miracles, called signs, with discourses that surround them. The signs have symbolic value pointing to one greater than signs who walked among them. The message conveyed comes in a thoroughly Jewish context, but often includes specific words capable of larger interpretation. These include knowledge, faith, and truth. The second section prepared the 12 disciples for Jesus' departure, providing timeless principles of how to remain faithful during His physical absence.

2

The most prominent theme is faith. John used the word for faith 98 times, more than any other writer. He used only its verbal form, "believing," never the noun "faith." The Gospel plots the development of genuine faith from a mere fascination with Jesus to a deeply personal, almost mystical relationship. Christian faith includes correct thought (theology) and life commitment. Many believe John is the last book written in the NT canon. John put Jesus' life in historical and theological perspective reflecting on perhaps 60 years developing Christianity after the resurrection.

One Message Four Ways

Anyone who reads the Gospels realizes that they tell the same story. The long passion narratives in each of the four Gospels reveal the central point: Jesus died in God's plan as the Savior of the world. Both the structure of the presentation of His life and the events recorded in His death reinforce that message.

A Pastoral Use of Harmonies

One of the grand excellencies of the Gospels is the form they take: they are, more or less, historic biographies that render Jesus as He was in His earthly ministry. A second, following close upon the first, is the fact that they come in a variety. Their narratives render for us four "portraits" of the one Christ. Or, perhaps better, they yield four carefully crafted *montages*. Under the direction of the Spirit, each Gospel helps us to "see" the most important aspects of Jesus' person and work. Done in local color, absent any automatism and surrealism, the Gospels are carefully crafted, limited editions of Jesus the Christ.

These Gospels have always had a special place in the life of the believer, the local church, and hence in the work of the pastor. Jesus is the very center of the biblical story and the Christian faith. The Gospels are our primary sources of information about Him—His birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection. They are critical to the leading pastoral tasks of maintaining vocational integrity, preaching Christ, and evangelizing a world in need of Him.

Because of the import of the Gospels and their diversity, a harmony of the Gospels is a required resource in a pastor's library. Such a harmony, if wisely used, can be an effective, multi-purpose ministry tool. The individual emphases that give each Gospel its distinctive qualities are made plain in a harmony. They give the pastor vital help as an under-shepherd of Christ, a preacher of the Gospels, and an ambassador to the lost.

As under-shepherds called to be an example of Christ for the believers we serve, it seems obvious that the most critical aspect of the pastor's work is to know and reflect the life and ministry of Christ personally. "Be conscientious about yourself and your teaching" (1 Tm 4:16) is Paul's counsel to Timothy. Spiritual self-care comes first before teaching! Of course, all believers

should aspire to a deeper knowledge of Christ in order to properly follow Him. But this is particularly true for the pastor—a man who must be able to live with integrity, saying to Christ's church: "Be imitators of me, as I also am of Christ" (1 Co 11:1). How is this to be done? For a start, it is accomplished by regular exposure to the Great Shepherd portrayed in the Gospels. C. S. Lewis, once calling for "real appreciation" of art, suggested an apt analogy for exposing our lives to Christ:

We must use our eyes. We must look, and go on looking, till we have certainly seen exactly what is there. We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.

It does every pastor unspeakable good to take a respite from speaking of and for Christ in order to surrender to Him afresh by watching Him. In this way we open ourselves to having something done to us by Christ rather than doing more of what we already do so well: doing for Him. In such times of quiet abandon, we are corrected and humbled. We see just how perfectly He orders His hearing and understanding the saving story of Jesus. Matthew proffers Christ as God's promised answer to those in need of hope.

3

Mark presents Christ as powerful in His weakness for those broken by their weaknesses. Luke gives us Christ as Savior for all the world of men, regardless of wealth, race, or place. John portrays Christ as the Giver of life and purpose. Thus, each human author works strategically as he writes to show the ultimate relevance of Christ in the lives of the people he is engaging.

The Gospels themselves thus suggest one pastoral strategy for their effective use in evangelism: identifying the deep human needs and concerns that exist in the current evangelistic field of opportunity and engaging them with the gospel of Jesus.

With knowledge of the lost and knowledge of the individual Gospels, the pastor-evangelist can select the most appropriate Gospel to use in a particular setting for preaching or evangelism. Indeed, knowing his audience as hopeless or powerless, class sensitive or purposeless, and having a sense of those audiences and emphases of the original evangelists make the pastor a worthy partner with the Holy Spirit in evangelism. What is more, such knowledge can open the flood gates of evangelistic creativity and confidence.

The Beginning of Jesus' Public Ministry

The call of the First Disciples

Matt. 4: 18-22, 16: 17-18; Mark 1: 16-20, 3:16; Luke 5:1-11, 6: 14a; John 1: 35-51

The Marriage at Cana

John 2: 1-11

The Sojourn at Capernaum

John 2:12

The First Journey to Jerusalem

John 2:13

The Cleansing of the Temple

Matt. 21: 12-13; Mark 11: 15-17; Luke 19: 45-46; John 2: 14-22

Jesus' Ministry in Jerusalem

John 2: 23-25

The Discourse with Nicodemus

John 3: 1-21

Jesus' Ministry in Judea

John 3:22

John's Testimony to Christ

John 3: 23-36

Jesus' Ministry in Galilee

The Journey into Galilee

Matt. 4:12; Mark 1: 14a; Luke 4:14a; John 4: 1-3

4

The Discourse with the Woman of Samaria

John 4: 4-42

Ministry in Galilee

Matt. 4: 13-17; Mark 1: 14b-15; Luke 4: 14b-15; John 4: 43-46a

Jesus' Preaching at Nazareth

Matt. 13: 53-58; Mark 6: 1-6a; Luke 16-30; John 7:15, 6:42, 4: 44, 10: 39

The Call of the Disciples

Matt. 4: 18-22; Mark 1: 16-20; Luke 5: 1-11; John 1: 35-51

The Dawning of God's Kingdom

Matthew 4: 12-25

At the end of John 20, two verses serve as an important clue for understanding the unique nature of the accounts of the life of Jesus Christ that we call the Gospels (John 20: 30-31). They say Jesus did many things that are not recorded in John's Gospel, but that these were included so that people reading the Gospel might believe Jesus is the Christ and through believing might have life in his name. *John included what he did because he had a specific objective in mind.* Therefore, he also left out much that might otherwise have been recorded.

What is true for John is true for the other Gospels as well, though the principle of selection is not so deliberately stated. We find an example of this in the second half of Matthew 4. At this point Matthew begins to write about Jesus' ministry (from v. 12). Everything prior to this has been an introduction. But in starting where he does, Matthew passes over many things from the earlier work of Jesus in Judea and Galilee that could have been included.

We are told about some of these things in John. Before returning to Galilee (which John records in 4:43), Jesus met and called the first of his disciples, turned the water to wine at

Cana, resided for a short while in Capernaum, returned to Jerusalem for an early Passover, drove the money changers from the temple, talked to Nicodemus, conducted an early teaching ministry in the Judean countryside, and had his encounter with the woman of Samaria on his way north again (see John 1:19-4:42). It is at this point that Matthew seems to pick up the story (Matt. 4:12-25).

Matthew does not say that the ministry of Jesus overlapped with that of John the Baptist, as John indicates (John 3:22-23), but Matthew's language allows for that possibility. In verse 11, Jesus was in the desert near the Jordan. Now Matthew says only that "when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee" (v. 12). This would have been about a year later. He does not tell how John came to be imprisoned at this point, but he does tell about it later on (see chap. 14:1-12).

Galilee of the Gentiles

What Matthew is concerned about and emphasizes—this is what governs his selection, at least of this early material—is that Jesus began his work in *Galilee*, which he identifies by a quotation from Isaiah 9:1-2 as "Galilee of the Gentiles." In other words, Jesus, the Jewish Messiah and King, began his ministry in a predominantly Gentile area and did so in fulfillment of an important Old Testament prophecy:

What makes this emphasis especially striking is that verses 13-16, the heart of the section, are unique to Matthew. They do not occur in Mark, Luke, or John. This seems strange at first, since Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels. Yet we may remember that Matthew also links the coming of the Gentile wise men to his account of Jesus' birth and that the book ends with Christ's command to take the gospel to "all nations" (Matt. 28:19).

5

Matthew does not want us to forget, at the start of the Gospel, at the end, or anywhere in between, that his message about this Jewish King and Savior is not only for Jews but for everyone. He is insisting, as much as did the author of the fourth Gospel, that Jesus Christ is "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42).

What about "Galilee of the Gentiles"? Where was it? What was it like? *Galil* means a "circuit." So Galilee of the Gentiles probably refers to the circuit of twenty Gentile cities given to King Solomon by Hiram, king of Tyre (see 1 Kings 9:11). Galilee was known as the area to the west of the Sea of Galilee at least from the time of Joshua (see Josh. 20:7). At the time of the conquest, Galilee was settled by the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. But there were many Gentile cities there and in the larger surrounding area, and Galilee became even more Gentile after the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C.

Galilee was not large. It was about fifty miles from north to south and about twenty-five miles across. Yet it was densely populated and was much more prosperous than the mountainous area of Judah to the south. Writing about a generation after the time of Jesus, the Jewish historian Josephus said there were 204 cities in Galilee that had more than 15,000 inhabitants. He should have known; he had been a military commander in the region.

We are not told why Jesus left Nazareth and adopted Capernaum as "his own town" (Matt. 9:1), but if the incident with which Luke begins his account of Christ's ministry occurred before this move—the attempt to throw Jesus off a cliff at Nazareth as a result of his first preaching (Luke 4:14—30)—that violent response would have been a very good reason. Matthew does not mention this, however. From Matthew's account we can only suppose that Jesus relocated because Capernaum's central location made it a fit base for the developing Galilean ministry. Today Capernaum is only a collection of ruins, including a partially rebuilt synagogue. But we know it was an important center in Jesus' day because it had a tax office, which Matthew had once managed, and a military garrison. From this base Jesus moved "throughout Galilee" for the greater part of his formal, three-year ministry (v. 23).

Light for the Gentiles

In verse 23, Matthew tells what Jesus did in these months: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." But in verse 17 he begins with the matter of chief importance, indicating that "Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'"

Although these are only brief statements of what Jesus was proclaiming in those days, they still tell us a great deal, especially when we put them together. They tell us that the heart of Jesus' message was the dawning of "the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven had come near because Jesus had come near. As to the message of that kingdom, which Jesus was now preaching, it was "the good news" (the gospel), namely, that Jesus was himself the promised Messiah or Savior. John had prepared for his coming, and now he had come. If we should then ask, "But how do we get to have a share in that kingdom or become part of it?" the answer is clear: "Repent and believe the good news," exactly the message ministers of the gospel have been given to preach to people everywhere today.

The message was the same before Christ's coming too, though the Old Testament faith included an anticipation of Christ's coming. It is also important to note that the message preached by Jesus was exactly the message that had been preached by John the Baptist. John said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt. 3:1). In the same way, Jesus preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt. 4:17). This indicates that there are no contradictions in Scripture and that the gospel is always one gospel. Jesus will add more to it later, of course, in fact, in the very next chapters. But even here it is the full gospel. It is the gospel you and I are also called on to believe and teach to others.

The Calling of the Four

We have been introduced to the first important location for Jesus' ministry: "Galilee of the Gentiles" (v. 15). We have been introduced to his message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (v. 17). Now we are to be introduced to an important part of his methodology: to call disciples he would teach and who would then teach and preach to other people.

6

According to the fourth Gospel, Jesus was already acquainted with some of these men. Andrew had been a follower of John the Baptist and was one of two who followed Jesus when John identified him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The other disciple is unnamed but was probably John himself. The chapter also tells how Andrew brought his brother Peter to Jesus, and then how Jesus called Philip, who called Nathanael (w. 40-51). Thus, two of these brothers, Andrew and Peter (and probably John also), were already known to Jesus and had been called by him earlier.

So what is Matthew describing in verses 18-22? He seems to be referring to a specific further call to ministry, that is, to leave everything and begin to follow Jesus. Jesus had invited the disciples to follow him on the earlier occasion (John 1:43), but this was different, which Matthew indicates by reporting that they immediately "left their nets" (in the case of Peter and Andrew), "the boat and their father" (in the case of James and John), and followed Jesus.

Later in the Gospel, Matthew will tell how Jesus called him (Matt. 9:9-13) and will introduce the others too (Matt. 10:2-4). But here he tells about the call of these four, probably because they were with Jesus from the earliest stages and were active in the Galilean ministry. The calling of the disciples shows that Jesus does not work without means and that his chief way of advancing his kingdom is by preaching.

These are the first four disciples:

Simon Peter. Peter became the natural leader of the Twelve and is mentioned in every list of the apostles (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13). There are major stories about Peter in Matthew 16:13-23 (and parallels); 26:69-75 (and parallels); and John 21:15-22.

Andrew. Andrew is not as prominent as the other three disciples, but he is important. He is always seen bringing other people to Jesus (John 1:40-42; 6:8-9; 12:20-22).

James. James was the first of the apostles to be martyred. He was killed by King Herod, who, when he saw that James' execution pleased the Jews, arrested Peter, intending to kill him also (Acts 12:1-2).

John. John called himself the apostle whom Jesus loved (John 13:23; 19:26). He wrote the fourth Gospel as well as the three Johannine letters and Revelation. It is worth noting here that although John's brother James was the first of the apostles to be martyred, John seems to have lived longer than any of the others, dying on the island of Patmos at an advanced age. This reminds us that we cannot predict God's ways. God does one thing with one of his disciples and something quite different with another.

"Follow Me"

In many texts, Jesus explains in greater detail and with other images what it means to be his disciple, but the command to follow him, which occurs in the middle of Matthew's account of Jesus' calling these first four disciples, is most basic.

We find it in many of these stories. It is here, in Jesus' calling of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. But several chapters later, in Matthew 9:9-13 (parallels in Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-31), it appears in Jesus' call of Matthew. Matthew was a tax-collector; he was despised by the people for his collaboration with the Roman authorities. But he obeyed Jesus and followed him. When the people protested Jesus' involvement with this "sinner," Jesus replied, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:12-13). His explanation shows that the command to follow Jesus was not only a physical following or even, as it were, an invitation to learn more about him to see if one wanted to be a permanent disciple. It was a turning from sin for salvation, to be healed by God.

The Gospel of John does things differently from the Synoptics, but the call to follow Jesus is no less prominent there. Indeed, there is a sense in which it provides a framework for the Gospel. Chapter 1 contains a long narrative in which John the Baptist bears witness to Jesus as the Son of God and the Lamb of God, and, as a result, two of John's disciples begin to follow Jesus, as I indicated earlier. Then, at the end of the Gospel Jesus tells Peter, whom he has just recommissioned to service, "Follow me!" (John 21:19). When Peter shifts attention from himself to the beloved disciple, Jesus replies, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" (v. 22). Coming at the end of the Gospel, as they do, these words are a statement to all would-be Christians that discipleship means following Jesus in a personal and costly way.

