



From Jesus to the Gospels

Solidifying the Kerygmatic Communities

BY JEFF REED

A 6-SESSION STUDY FOR DIALOGUE IN
COMMUNITY AROUND THE SCRIPTURES



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FROM JESUS TO THE GOSPELS ①

The Gospels were written last. They were written in the last third of the first century after all of Paul's letters, and probably after most of the other letters from the Apostles as well. Think about it for a moment. Who wrote Mark? Mark. Who was he? Most believe this is the John Mark who was on Paul's first missionary journey and who later became a confidant and assistant to Peter. Who was Luke? He was an assistant to Paul. Mark and Luke wrote after their mentors were gone. Most think Matthew was built upon Mark's work, and we know the last collections of writing in the New Testament were John's. So probably all of the Gospels of the New Testament were written after Peter and Paul were gone from the scene.

This has huge implications for both how we interpret and use the Gospels in our ministries. If this is the case, how was the gospel communicated before the Gospels were written? How did we move from Jesus and His "proclamation of the good news," to the gospel statement formulated and handed down by the Apostles, to the actual Gospels themselves? We will explore that in the following passages.



Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGES: MARK 1:1-15; ACTS 10:34-43;
1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11; LUKE 1:1-4

Think Through the Questions:

1. What was the essence of the gospel handed down to Paul from Peter and the Apostles?
2. How was this gospel message formed? What role did Peter have in it?
3. Why did Jesus Himself never state this gospel formula, as stated by Peter and the Apostles?
4. How did we move from Jesus announcing this coming good news, to the gospel message formed by the Apostles, to the books of the Gospels themselves?

Summarize the Core Teaching of the Passage:

Write a paragraph below that summarizes the progress from Jesus' proclamation of the gospel (good news) to the Apostles' gospel statements (the kerygma), to the Gospels themselves. Comment on the order of progression. Also comment on why Jesus never gave the gospel formulation as delivered by the Apostles and why that formulation is not recorded in statement form in the Gospels.

Record your conclusions below.



Consult the Scholars

The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

Read and Reflect on This Brief Commentary on the Formation of the Gospel Message.

Mark begins by calling his Gospel, the entire narrative, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. The term *beginning* carries the sense of the origin, the source, the foundation. The term *good news* literally means “gospel.” So Mark is explaining the source or origin of the gospel that the churches were embracing. It states in Mark 1:14 that Jesus went around “proclaiming the good news.” The word proclaim is “kerygma,” the term used later by the Early Church to refer to the proclamation of the gospel or literally “the gospel we proclaim.” Jesus did not proclaim the gospel straightforward in clear terms but mainly referred to it

as the good news they were to embrace, which He was bringing. In fact, the three times He explained that part of this good news was His death and resurrection—the heart of the future gospel statement (kerygma)—He veiled it from them, “he did not want anyone to know about it.” (See Mark 8:31; 9:30–31; 10:32–34.) The good news was given in pieces by Jesus and would not all be put together until after Jesus left, after He sent the Spirit, and after Peter delivered his five sermons in Acts.

Peter gave five “kerygmatic” sermons in Acts, in which he essentially formulates a gospel statement—he proclaims the good news.

1. Acts 2:14–42
2. Acts 3:11–26
3. Acts 4:5–13
4. Acts 5:27–32
5. Acts 10:1–48

These sermons all contain the essence of what would become the gospel tradition, which they handed down, as Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15:1–6. The essence of Peter’s core gospel proclamation (kerygma), at the house of Cornelius, is summarized as follows:

- Every nation is acceptable.
- You know the message:
 - Jesus Christ is Lord of all.
 - It begins with the baptism of John.
 - Jesus went about doing good.
 - He died, was buried, and was resurrected.
 - He appeared to many.
 - He will return as judge of the living and the dead.
 - Everyone who believes receives forgiveness.

Paul refers to this gospel statement in 1 Corinthians 15:1–6. He called it “the good news I proclaimed to you”—the same phrase Jesus used in Mark 1:14, only now a complete statement. Paul comments on the fact that he passed it on to them in the form just as he received it. The Corinthians needed to hold firmly to this message as they received it. When he says in v. 3 that he “handed it on,” he is referring to an authoritative process of passing on traditions.

Now let’s bring Mark and Luke into the picture. They are the two assistants of the two apostolic pillars of the Church: Peter to the Jewish churches and Paul to the Gentile churches. At this time, Paul and Peter are dead. The Jewish churches are still unstable in the gospel, which led to a whole new entity outside of Judaism—the Church. The Gentile churches do not have the Jewish heritage of the Old Testament. The churches are being persecuted. Some of the Jewish believers are turning back, and the Gentile churches are new “in the game.” These “kerygmatic communities” need to be solidified in the gospel so they are confident and know the whole picture and are deeply rooted in the historical and prophet-

ic depth of the gospel they have embraced. So Mark records all the essential foundations/source/origins of this gospel he got from Peter, the most authoritative witness at the time. And Luke does the same, since he traveled with Paul. In Luke 1:1–4 Luke again refers to all that had happened to them and comments that he is accurately recording all that was handed down to him (again an authoritative reference), so that Theophilus (and the churches) might have confidence in the gospel he had embraced and in the movement of kerygmatic churches he had been “catechized” in.

So the path from Jesus to the Gospels looks like this: first Jesus proclaimed the gospel as good news that the time had come for God to begin setting up His kingdom and for the promises given to Israel to begin to be fulfilled. But Jesus fell way short of proclaiming the good news as Peter did after He left. Peter and the Apostles proclaimed the good news (the gospel) and eventually formed an official gospel statement, which was officially handed down to Christ’s followers—the authoritative tradition. Finally, after the Apostles began to move off the scene, the official account of the origin, source, and foundation of this official gospel and resulting movement was recorded for the churches to solidify these communities in the legitimacy of what they had embraced.

The implications of this process are huge. The Gospels were not written as clear, fully developed statements of the gospel. They were written to show the foundations of this gospel in order to solidify the churches, so they would be confident that what they had embraced is true—deeply rooted in prophetic foundations, historical realities, and producing exactly Jesus’ intended outcome in a movement of multiplying churches (kerygmatic communities). This was the plan He was shaping all along. The Gospels assume that the readers would have already embraced the gospel, were established in Christ’s teaching embedded in the apostolic letters, and that they were part of the progress of this gospel globally. The Gospels are not where we start with new believers. They do not contain a clear statement of the gospel in kerygmatic form, nor are they intended to deliver a foundational clear body of teaching for new disciples. We will explore all of these implications in this entire series.

Read and Reflect on Key Quotes.

The following quote is taken from *Introduction to the New Testament* by Raymond Brown.

“The Three Stages of Gospel Formation

(1) THE PUBLIC MINISTRY OR ACTIVITY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH (the first third of the century AD). He did things of note, orally proclaimed his message, and interacted with others (e.g., JBap and Jewish religious figures). Jesus chose companions who traveled with him and saw and heard what he said and did. Their memories of his words and deeds supplied the raw ‘Jesus material.’ These memories were already selective since they concentrated on what pertained to Jesus’ proclamation of God, not the many trivia of ordinary existence (or elements of the ‘actual Jesus’). On a practical level it is important for modern readers to keep reminding themselves that these were memories of what was said and done

by a Jew who lived in Galilee and Jerusalem in the 20s. Jesus' manner of speaking, the problems he faced, his vocabulary and outlook were those of that specific time and place. Many failures to understand Jesus and misapplications of his thoughts stem from the fact that Gospel readers remove him from space and time and imagine that he was dealing with issues he never encountered. There can even be a sophisticated form of misrepresenting Jesus by imposing on him categories that really do not fit, e.g., peasant or freedom-fighter.

“(2) THE (APOSTOLIC) PREACHING ABOUT JESUS (the second third of the 1st century AD). Those who had seen and heard Jesus had their following of him confirmed through postresurrectional appearances (1 Cor 15:5–7); and they came to full faith in the risen Jesus as the one through whom God had manifested ultimate salvific love to Israel and eventually to the whole world—a faith they vocalized through confessional titles (Messiah/Christ, Lord, Savior, Son of God, etc.). That postresurrectional faith illumined the memories of what they had seen and heard during the preresurrectional period; and so they proclaimed his words and deeds with enriched significance. (Modern readers, accustomed to a media goal of uninvolved, factual reporting, need to recognize the very different atmosphere of early Christian preaching.) We speak of these preachers as ‘apostolic’ because they understood themselves as sent forth (*apostellein*) by the risen Jesus, and their preaching is often described as kerygmatic proclamation (*kērygma*) intended to bring others to faith. Eventually the circle of missionary preachers was enlarged beyond the original companions of Jesus, and the faith experiences of newcomers like Paul enriched what was received and proclaimed.

“Another factor operative in this stage of development was the necessary adaptation of the preaching to a new audience. If Jesus was a Galilean Jew of the first third of the 1st century who spoke Aramaic, by midcentury his gospel was being preached in the diaspora to urban Jews and Gentiles in Greek, a language that he did not normally speak (if he spoke it at all). This change of language involved translation in the broadest sense of that term, i.e., a rephrasing in vocabulary and patterns that would make the message intelligible and alive for new audiences. Sometimes the rephrasing (which has left visible traces in the written Gospels) affected incidentals, e.g., a type of tile roof familiar to a Greek audience in Luke 5:19, as contrasted with the Palestinian-style roof through which a hole was opened in Mark 2:4. But other rephrasing had theological repercussions, e.g., the choice of *sōma*, ‘body’ for the eucharistic component in the Synoptics and I Cor 11:24 (as distinct from the more literal translation *sarx*, ‘flesh’ in John 6:51 and Ignatius, *Romans* 7:3). That choice may have facilitated the figurative use of body in the theology of the body of Christ of which Christians are members (I Cor 12:12–27). Thus developments in the Jesus tradition were promoting the growth of Christian theology.

“Most often ‘preaching’ serves as the umbrella term for this second stage of Gospel development, although other formative elements contributed to the Gospel end-products. For instance, liturgy or worship became part of Christian life as seen in Gospel baptismal and eucharistic formulas. The shaping of material by catechesis can be detected in Matt. Com-

munity controversies supplied coloration, e.g., struggles with Jewish synagogue leaders (in Matt and John) and internally with some who cry ‘Lord, Lord’ in Matt 7:21 (against spiritual enthusiasts?).

“(3) THE WRITTEN GOSPELS (the last third of the 1st century, approximately). Although in the middle of the previous period as the Jesus material was being preached some early written collections (now lost) would have appeared, and although preaching based on *oral* preservation and development of the Jesus material continued well into the 2d century, the era 65–100 was probably when all four canonical Gospels were written. As for the evangelists or Gospel writers/authors, according to traditions stemming from the 2d century and reflected in titles prefaced to the Gospels ca. 200 or even earlier, two Gospels were attributed to apostles (Matthew and John) and two to apostolic men (i.e., companions of the apostles: Mark [of Peter] and Luke [of Paul]). Yet most modern scholars do not think that the evangelists were eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus. This surely represents a change of view; but the denial of the tradition may not be so sharp as it first seems, for the early traditions about authorship may not always have referred to the evangelist who composed the final Gospel. Ancient attribution may have been concerned with the one responsible for the tradition preserved and enshrined in a particular Gospel (i.e., to the *authority* behind the Gospel), or to the one who wrote one of the main sources of the Gospel. See below for the problem of what Papias meant when he stated, ‘Matthew arranged in order the sayings [*logia*] in the Hebrew [= Aramaic?] language, and each one interpreted/translated them as he was able’ (EH 3.39.16).

“The recognition that the evangelists were not eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry is important for understanding the differences among the Gospels. In the older approach, wherein the evangelists themselves were thought to have seen what they reported, it was very difficult to explain differences among their Gospels. How could eyewitness John (chap. 2) report the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of the ministry and eyewitness Matthew (chap 21) report the cleansing of the Temple at the end of the ministry? In order to reconcile them, interpreters would contend that the Temple-cleansing happened twice and that each evangelist chose to report only one of the two instances. However, if neither evangelist was an eyewitness and each had received an account of the Temple-cleansing from an intermediate source, neither one (or only one) may have known when it occurred during the public ministry. Rather than depending on a personal memory of events, each evangelist has arranged the material he received in order to portray Jesus in a way that would meet the spiritual needs of the community to which he was addressing the Gospel. *Thus the Gospels have been arranged in logical order, not necessarily in chronological order.* The evangelists emerge as authors, shaping, developing, pruning the transmitted Jesus material, and as theologians, orienting that material to a particular goal.

“*Corollaries of this approach to Gospel formation* would include the following:

- The Gospels are not literal records of the ministry of Jesus. Decades of developing and adapting the Jesus tradition had intervened. How much development? That has to be

determined by painstaking scholarship which most often produces judgments ranging from possibility to probability, but rarely certainty.

- A thesis that does not present the Gospels as literal history is sometimes interpreted to mean that they are not true accounts of Jesus. Truth, however, must be evaluated in terms of the intended purpose. The Gospels might be judged untrue if the goal was strict reporting or exact biography; but if the goal was to bring readers/hearers to a faith in Jesus that opens them to God's rule or kingdom, then adaptations that make the Gospels less than literal (adding the dimension of faith, adjusting to new audiences) were made precisely to facilitate that goal and thus to make the Gospels true.
- To some such an approach to Gospel truth is unsatisfactory since, if there have been developments and adaptations, how do we know that the Gospels offer a message faithful to that of Jesus? Scholars cannot be certain guides since they disagree widely on the amount of alteration, ranging from major to minor. This is a theological issue, and so a theological answer is appropriate. Those who believe in inspiration will maintain that the Holy Spirit guided the process, guaranteeing that the end-product Gospels reflect the truth that God sent Jesus to proclaim.
- Much time has been spent in the history of exegesis harmonizing Gospel differences, not only in minor matters but also on a large scale, e.g., trying to make one, sequential narrative out of the very different Matthean and Lucan infancy narratives, or out of Luke's account of appearances of the risen Jesus in Jerusalem and Matt's account of an appearance on a mountain in Galilee. Besides asking whether this is possible, we need to ask whether such harmonization is not a distortion. In an outlook of faith, divine providence furnished four different Gospels, not a harmonized version; and it is to the individual Gospels, each with its own viewpoint, that we should look. Harmonization, instead of enriching, can impoverish.
- In the last half of the 20th century respect for the individuality of each Gospel had an effect on church liturgy or ritual. Many churches have followed the lead of the Roman Catholic liturgical reformation in introducing a three-year lectionary where in the first year the Sunday Gospel readings are taken from Matt, in the second year from Mark, and in the third year from Luke. In the Roman church this replaced a one-year lectionary where without any discernible theological pattern the reading was taken one Sunday from Matt, another Sunday from Luke, etc. A major factor in making the change was the recognition that Gospel pericopes should be read sequentially within the same Gospel if one is to do justice to the theological orientation given to those passages by the individual evangelist. For instance, a parable that appears in all three Synoptic Gospels can have different meanings depending on the context in which each evangelist has placed it.²¹

Record any insights from the brief commentary and quotes.



Think Through the Issues

This progressive unfolding of the gospel and the late writing of the Gospels has huge implications for our churches. We live in a day when the Gospels are put in the front of our New Testament, and we assume they need to be mastered before anything else in the New Testament. Massive discipleship organizations build their entire ministry strategy out of the Gospels. All of their basic training for new believers begins with the Gospels. This is entirely upside down and leads one to both misunderstand the church and to distort Christ's plan for the progress of the gospel.

In this section, we will explore the implications of this progression from Jesus to the Gospels and some of the devastating effects of misunderstanding the use of the Gospels. We will also begin exploring the proper use of the Gospels in establishing churches and in the progress of the gospel itself. Once the Gospels are properly situated in the training and missional process, they become very important tools for keeping churches “in the game” as growing kerygmatic communities, effective in their contribution to the global progress of the gospel.

ISSUE: The progressive unfolding of the gospel

Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. Why is it important to understand this progressive unfolding of the gospel and the late writing of the Gospels?
2. What are some of the problems that might result from not understanding this progression? What major interpretive errors might be made? How might we misuse the Gospels?
3. How might this understanding reorder the whole concept of Western discipleship movements and training organizations? In what way are they distorting the use of the Gospels?
4. Does the use of the Gospels in the early churches provide a pattern for how we should use them today? How should we use them in both instructing churches and believers and in the progress of the gospel itself?



Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion.

Discuss the Issue in Your Small Group.

Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion.



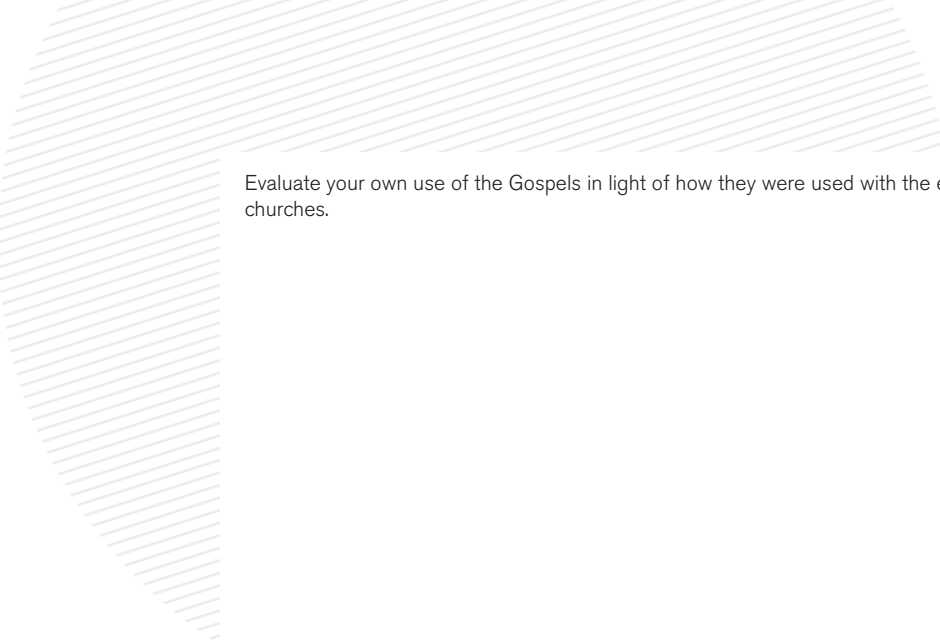
Apply the Principles

It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

Think Back Through the First Three Steps.

Design an Application for Your Life.

Think through the progression the early churches experienced from embracing the gospel after Jesus left until the time when the Gospels were written. Record your understanding of how this should shape the development process of new believers and the process of establishing churches.



Evaluate your own use of the Gospels in light of how they were used with the early churches.