

Sierra Leadership Network Curriculum: Month 2, Year 2

Participation in the Sierra Leadership Network (SLN) is a process of adult learning. It is the responsibility of the participant to do their assignments and seek out the necessary accountability. It is the responsibility of the participant to schedule time with their mentor, not the other way around. Here is a checklist of this month's exercises and space for comments. All useful generated materials should be placed in your Sierra Leadership Network binder. The mentor will look over the exercises and be given opportunity to add their own comments. Be sure you take your binder to the quarterly meetings at Granite Springs Church to also be available to the SLN directors.

Month 2, Year 2

Date Completed

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ NT Gospels: [Estimated time: \_\_\_\_\_]  
Mentor Comments:

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ NT Gospels Interpretation Exercise:  
Mentor Comments [Estimated time: \_\_\_\_\_]

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Being Like Exercise: [Estimated time: \_\_\_\_\_]  
Mentor Comments

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Participant Signature

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Mentor Signature

## Introduction to The Gospels

### *The Synoptic Problem*

It is a deep irony that the only Biblical accounts of the one who stands at the center of our reality are contained in four sometimes contradictory packages. The recollections and shaped narratives of the one who would cause stridently monotheistic Jews to exclaim that this man was indeed, somehow, the God of the Old Testament, fit to be worshiped and obeyed, seen to be the fulfilment of the Torah would contain frustrating detail discrepancies even surrounding accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection. It is miraculous that the church, even hundreds of years later, fighting to define and understand this enigma would resist the urge to harmonize and smooth out the quirks and wrinkles contained in their authorized accounts. It must be that the Holy Spirit in his wisdom not only wants us to learn from these ancient texts, but also wants us to learn something about these ancient texts, and something about faith. Unlike Muslims with the Koran, we do not consider the texts themselves to be divine, but inspired. The Bible itself isn't our Savior, but it points us to the one who saves us, and he just can't seem to be sufficiently explained in just one man's account.

Scholars have repeatedly attempted to use the 4 gospel accounts to get behind them. To discover "the real story" or "the historical Jesus" by trying to sift and shape the texts to reveal one unified picture. Each attempt at this endeavor seems to yield not the "objective" picture promised, but simply a reflection of the scholar's screens used to do the sifting. In each case, as in the cases of "the new Jesus" "discovered" by unearthing some "forgotten" or "repressed" gnostic gospel, the "Jesus" derived appears to be a fresh coat of paint encasing the conclusions they hoped to discover in the first place. It is only by our submission to the 4 authorized accounts, as they are written, even sometimes using the gnawing discrepancies as clues to the author's intent, that we have any hope of connecting with the ancient author in order to come face to face with a Jesus who stands apart from our own subtly manipulative wills, and encounter one who is our benevolent adversary, one who refuses to leave us in our miserable predicament but rather challenges us to become what we were created to be. Our challenge this month is to both come to grips with the accounts, and learn to worship and obey the man, in hopes of leading others to do the same.

There is no substitute for simply reading all 4 Gospels and paying attention to how each Gospel tells the story. One of the things you will notice right off the bat will be how these are not history texts or newspaper accounts of Jesus' life. Many questions we may be curious about are not answered, and other things that seem unimportant to us are highlighted. The Gospels are sermons, preached that we might believe that this Jesus of Nazareth is LORD of creation. That's a tall order. The gospels are historical, they relate history to us, but they also tell it in a way that sometimes places thematic considerations over episodic detail. Some preachers and teachers go out of their way to smooth out the details so as to avoid any appearance of discrepancy. That may feel comfortable at times, but it is important to note that the Bible doesn't do this and the church since very early on has resisted harmonizing the Gospels. We shouldn't assume that the four witnesses we are given were "careless" in their telling. Given the sophistication of their work it seems unlikely they would not notice differences. In my opinion it honors their efforts more to

listen to them and learn what they are trying to teach us, rather than get hung up on things they didn't get hung up on.

### *History and Themes of the 4 Gospels*

Let's begin by making some observations about the books. You can find in commentaries, study bibles and handbooks a lot written about the order these books were written in and sources they relied upon. We don't really know for sure and all such conclusions should be arrived upon with a degree of humility. Most will agree that the 4 books were written because the generation of apostolic witnesses to the life of Jesus was dying and the church needed a more enduring record of Jesus' life and teaching. Much of what the gospels contain we suppose was originally passed along by oral tradition. The stories and teachings of Jesus were told and retold in homes and church meetings. Mark is often seen as one of the earliest of the Gospels, mostly because it is the most brief and appears it might have been a direct source for the authors of Matthew and Luke. Luke begins by recognizing that at the time he wrote his version, others were also trying to do the same thing (Luke 1:1-4). That speaks to both the need for the effort, and the reliance upon sources. Many have also noted that not only do Matthew and Luke appear to rely upon Mark, not only for words but also chronology at times, but they also bear an unusual similarity in the materials that they contain that are not included in Mark. Some suggest that Luke perhaps used a copy of Matthew, or perhaps there was a common source that both referred to independently. This is often called Q. It is of course speculation because we don't have such a "source" available to us. John clearly comes from a different place bringing out different themes and relating Jesus' story from a different perspective.

Each Gospel will bring out themes that their authors saw as important to impress upon the early church, their intended audience. Mark begins as he writes, terse and to the point: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God". He puts his emphasis right there on the front end. This is who Jesus is and will be seen to be in his book. Traditionally Mark was connected to Peter, and many suppose this Gospel was written for Gentiles, possibly in Rome. Mark highlights persecution and discipleship, often stressing what Jesus did more than what Jesus said.

Matthew might have been directed to Jews. Themes particularly important to Jews inside and outside the early church, particularly the transition in seeing God's chosen people as designated in the bloodline of Abraham to those reborn in the blood of Jesus Christ are particularly strong in Matthew, note particularly the parables of the workers in the vineyard (Mt 20), the parable of the two sons and the parable of the tenants (Mt. 21). Matthew is also very strong in terms of seeing Jesus as fulfilment of the Old Testament. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount has tones of a new word coming down from the mountain (Moses and Sinai), etc.

Luke's fits well with what we would imagine a companion of Paul to write, something that would work well for Gentile audiences in the Roman empire. The parables of Luke 15, the lost coin, the lost son, etc. preach very well to a people who were far from God. Also note Luke's concern for the poor repeatedly made explicit in his version (compare the Beatitudes in Matthew to Luke).

John's gospel doesn't build on the Marcan chronology. John's gospel is often divided into "The Book of Signs" which is roughly the beginning through chapter 12, and the "Book of Glory" which is chapter 13 to the end. "The Book of Signs" will be carried along thematically by the "signs" that Jesus does and how people respond to them. The structure of the book is very episodic with plenty of time given to a few in-depth stories, which is different from the rapid fire segments in Matthew, Mark and Luke, thus the designation of those three as the "Synoptic" Gospels. John also has the "I am" sayings which call us back to the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush. "I am the good shepherd", "I am the way, the truth and the life". John's audience may well have been a Jewish one making these pronouncements earth shaking. In the book of Glory the emphasis will be on Jesus as he is glorified in his passion. We get a long, in-depth treatment of Jesus' intimate teaching to his disciples (chapters 13-17). In some ways John's gospel is the most intimate, suggesting that this gospel perhaps came from "the disciple Jesus loved".

#### *Jesus in the Old Testament Context:*

Jesus will look different depending upon the backdrop you see him against. Jesus can only be faithfully understood if his ministry is seen in continuity (sometimes with some striking contrasts) with the Old Testament. When you are studying a story, teaching or parable of Jesus, take some time to study and reflect on its Old Testament roots or connections.

#### *Jesus within the context of a particular book:*

We've often re-stated my Old Testament professor John Stek's maxim "If you've only got time to read one book on a text, read the book its in." Each Gospel writer retells the story in a way to emphasize certain themes and teachings. Pay attention to the details, structures, contexts and themes of the book from which you are teaching and see how the passage you are treating moves the author's overall presentation forward. Context, context, context! Most of the violence we do to the text happens when we ignore the whole story that contains this small passage.

#### *Books and Commentaries:*

There are obviously innumerable books written on the Gospels and about Jesus. You might want to speak with your mentor about the books that he or she has found to be most helpful. People also have different tastes in commentaries. Some commentaries are more helpful for those without training in Greek and Hebrew, while other commentaries effectively demand knowledge of those languages. The best thing you can do is borrow a few and see what is most helpful for you. I'll list a few of the commentaries that I have found most helpful in my work in the Gospels:

*Matthew:* My favorite Matthew commentaries are the regrettably out of print Christbook and The Churchbook by Frederick Dale Bruner published by Word. I generally turn to these first when treating the book of Matthew. Davies' treatment of Matthew from a technical, in-depth treatment in the "International Critical Commentary" series is exhaustive but also very insightful. Regrettably also very expensive. I also enjoy Dallas Willard's The Divine Conspiracy which follows the Sermon on the Mount roughly from a discipleship perspective.

*Mark:* My two favorite commentaries on Mark are from William Lane in the “New International Commentary on the New Testament” series by Eerdmans, and CEB Cranfield’s commentary on Mark. I’ve found the one in the Word series on Mark helpful as well.

*Luke:* I used to rely most heavily on the Anchor Bible Commentary on Luke along with Marshal’s commentary in the Eerdman’s “Greek” collection until I got a hold of Darrell Bock’s large 2 volume piece published by Baker and at this point tend to refer to that one first.

*John:* If my office were on fire and I had only enough space in my arms to rescue just a few commentaries they would definitely include Raymond Brown’s commentary on John in the Anchor Bible series. It is getting older but I love how he writes and selects his material. Brown is a master and is very helpful even though he is detailed. There are other good works on John, but I always grab Brown first.

### **Gospels Exercise A:**

When we study the Synoptic and notice the differences between the versions, we should not get sidetracked in trying to figure out “the story behind the story”, we should use these differences to understand more clearly the intent of the author for the Gospel we are basing our sermon or study upon to see what point they are trying to make or theme they are working to develop. This exercise will help you begin to see the differences and what the authors were trying to do.

1. Study the accounts of John the Baptist and Jesus’ baptism in Matthew, Mark and Luke.
2. Note the major differences between them. (There are numerous minor differences, note the differences you find to be important to highlight.)
3. How is each version of the story shaped and to what effect? What themes or perspectives are brought out by each author’s particular shaping of the story?
4. How does this one particular story highlight the distinct styles and themes of the different Gospel accounts?
5. On the basis of your study, consider the baptism of Jesus. Why was he baptized? What does his baptism teach us about the sacrament of baptism?

### **Practical Interpretation Exercise B:**

If practical and possible, read the entirety of all 4 Gospels. Write a sermon or a Bible study from something in any of the 4 Gospels. Preach or teach that study and report to your mentor.

### **Being Like Jesus Exercise:**

After reading and studying Jesus carefully over the last few weeks, what have you learned about him? What has impressed you about him? In what area of your life has the Holy Spirit convicted you as a result of once again reading the 4 Gospels? Write a brief paper on what you have learned from Jesus in terms of how your life needs to change. What things need to be diminished? What things need to grow? Share this with your mentor and post it if you dare. :)