

The Gospels Introduced

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The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

—Mark 1:1

Let us set the table for understanding the Gospel of Mark by first bringing you two sermons of introduction: one offering some general perspectives about the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and one offering some specific perspectives on the Gospel of Mark. The third sermon will begin the exposition of Mark's Gospel.

You may ask, "Why are you spending time on two sermons that set the table before bringing out the main course?" Setting the table is not wasting time, nor is it irrelevant to enjoyment of a good meal. Setting the table gives you the tools for properly eating the meal, enjoying the experience, and profiting from it. It would be rather difficult to eat a steak without a knife and fork. So in these first two sermons we will set the table and offer some appetizers that will sharpen your hunger for the first full-course meal.

Understanding these introductory perspectives should also help you offer an intelligent, believing response to the Gospel of Mark. They will give you some basic tools to understand the Gospels in general, and the Gospel of Mark in particular, and will also help you in studying and applying the Word of God on your own.

Let us begin by considering some general principles about the Gospels, that is, that section of the Bible that runs from Matthew through John. We will address five questions:

1. How did the Gospels come to us?

Most of you who are Bible-reading, church-going Christians have a better understanding of how the epistles of the New Testament have come to us than you do of how the four Gospels have come to us. Take 1 Corinthians, for example. We understand that Paul had received information from the household of Chloe that there were problems in the church at Corinth. Paul wrote the Corinthian church to address these problems. So, we rightly conclude that 1 Corinthians was an apostolic response to a first-century church's problems. A similar case can be made for most of the other New Testament epistles.

But most of you may not understand how we received the four Gospels. In a general way, of course, we can say that the four Gospels have come to us as have all the other books of the Bible, namely, through God-ordained writers inspired by the Holy Spirit who have recorded for us the history of God's mighty saving activity in the midst of His people.

In other words, the books of the Bible record for us what is frequently called "the history of redemption." By that term we mean that God throughout history has been doing a work of redeeming or saving His people. Through that work which has been going on ever since man fell into sin in Paradise, God has given to us in various periods of history written documents that embody the record of His saving purposes and acts.

What are the major facts of that history as they relate to the Gospels? For many centuries God's gracious saving purpose was focused on the nation of Israel. That nation, which reached the apex of its development as a kingdom under the reigns of David and Solomon, was sent by God into captivity because of its sin. Afterwards a remnant of the people returned to the land of Palestine. For four hundred years, sometimes called "the silent years," God sent no prophet to these people. No one appeared in Israel who could say, "Thus saith the Lord."

During those silent years, Israel and the rest of the then-known world came under Roman rule. Then one day God sent

into the wilderness of Judea a strangely dressed but powerful preacher named John, known as John the Baptist (or the Baptizer). John called the nation to repentance and baptized those who responded to his call as a sign and seal of their repentance and the remission of their sins. While the region of Palestine was electrified by his preaching and influence, John announced that he was only the forerunner of One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. He spoke of this person as, “the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That Lamb of God, known as Jesus of Nazareth, soon came to be baptized by John in the River Jordan. While Jesus was standing in the water, the Holy Spirit came upon Him in the form of a dove and a voice spoke out of heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17).

After spending forty days in the wilderness where He resisted Satan’s temptations, Jesus of Nazareth began a public ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing, which became the focal point of religious concern wherever He went in Palestine.

The official religious leaders of Israel opposed the rising tide of Jesus’s popularity. After three years of public ministry, Jesus was arrested, condemned, and executed as a common criminal. He rose from the dead on the third day, and for the next forty days appeared to select individuals and groups of His disciples, confirming His resurrection, giving them directives about their responsibilities after He would return to heaven, and assuring them that He would send His Holy Spirit to empower them as His witnesses.

Ten days after Jesus ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit came upon the body of His disciples assembled in Jerusalem, who immediately began to tell others what they had witnessed in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. As they did so, many others came to embrace Christ as Savior and Lord, and were baptized. They then formed communities of believers called “churches.” The news of salvation in Jesus spread through all parts of Palestine and into the Roman Empire. Within

the space of one generation, nearly all of the known world had been confronted with this testimony of believers about the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

Three points should be underscored in this brief history of what God was doing in Christ as recorded in the four Gospels and continued in the book of Acts. First, *the apostolic church was founded by the oral apostolic witness to the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ*. When Peter stood up to preach at Pentecost, he did not have any of the four Gospels in his hands. He didn't even have the Old Testament in his hands. But he had memorized much of Scripture. And he knew its true meaning through the ministry of Christ and the Holy Spirit (Luke 22:45). Peter also spoke as an eyewitness to the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. In Acts 2:22, having announced his text (Joel 2:32), Peter begins his application by saying, "Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know." He goes on to say in verse 32: "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses."

Thus, the apostles of Jesus were eyewitnesses in the strictest sense of the term. When a witness is called into court and put on the witness stand, he is asked to testify about what he has seen with his eyes and heard with his ears. So, in the outworking of the saving purposes of God, the apostolic church throughout the entire Roman Empire was founded upon the apostles' oral witness to the teachings and actions of Christ (cf. Luke 24:44–48).

Second, *the oral apostolic witness was the basis of the written record of the teachings and acts of Christ*. In the first two verses of the Gospel of Luke, Luke writes to Theophilus: "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word"

Do you see which came first? Eyewitnesses told what they had seen and heard, and now some of those witnesses—including

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—and others who heard them are writing an account of their testimony. Luke goes on to say in the next two verses, “It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed” (Luke 1:3–4).

You see, the instruction came by the oral proclamation of eyewitnesses. The written body of witness followed. The oral apostolic witness was the basis of what ultimately became the written witness.

Third, *this written witness of the four Gospels then became the standard for the church’s witness to God’s salvation in Jesus Christ.* The apostles and evangelists adhered closely and reverently to what they had seen and heard from their divine Master, and their disciples faithfully reproduced their testimony. At the beginning, the need of an authoritative written record did not exist, since the facts of Christ’s life and His words were fresh and vivid in people’s memories. But as the church grew, it soon included those who had little or no personal knowledge of these facts. The church now needed a written record of the testimony of those first eyewitnesses.

These apostles and evangelists presented the teachings and acts of Jesus with a view to winning converts to Christ and establishing converts in the faith of Christ, and as they did so, the body of what they conveyed began to take a particular shape and form in accord with what Christ had delivered to them. That peculiar shape and form is embodied in the four Gospels, each of which was written with a somewhat different audience in mind. In no case, however, did they distort what Christ had delivered to them. It is a serious error to suggest that Paul reinvented Christianity, as many allege; or that the apostles perverted Christ’s “simple message of brotherhood” into a way of salvation, as the modernists teach.

So the four Gospels came to us by the inspiration of God, when, after the church was founded under the guidance of the

Spirit, the need for written records was urgently set before the apostles. From about AD 65 to 85, the apostles responded to that need by writing these four Gospel accounts.

2. What is the nature of the Gospels?

The Gospels do not fit into any other genre of literature. Christ's unique person and work, upon which the Gospels focus, requires "a literary form that is without clear parallel" in all of the literature being written at that time.¹ Let me explain this uniqueness by first stating what the four Gospels are not, then explaining what they are.

First, *the Gospels are not four different gospels or belief systems*. Basically there is only one gospel. That gospel is Jesus Christ, the good news of God's way of salvation for guilty sinners. The four Gospels are simply different ways of portraying this one gospel, this one Savior.²

Second, *the Gospels are not four attempts to give a complete biographical, chronological history of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth*. In each of the Gospels, whole segments of Jesus's life are passed over in silence. At other times, such as in Luke 2:52, several years are compressed into one sentence: "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man." No attempt is made in any Gospel to provide comprehensive coverage of Jesus's life. The Gospels tell us little about His childhood and nothing about the influences that shaped Him as a teenager. If you read the Gospels carefully you will notice that more than 25 percent of their content focuses on the last week of our Lord's life on earth.

The Gospel of Mark starts with Christ as a full grown adult, age thirty, who is about to commence His public ministry. It then covers only the last three years of His life and work. Mark begins

1. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 46–48.

2. Gordon D. Fee and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., gen. eds., *The Eerdmans Companion to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 517.

by announcing, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).

Third, *the Gospels are not four attempts to give a minute court record of selected teachings and actions of Jesus*. In different Gospels, sayings and events are not reported word-for-word the same. For example, consider the Parable of the Sower. Compare Matthew’s account (13:1–9) with Mark’s version (4:1–9) of the parable and its interpretation. Certain words and phrases are different. The same concepts appear in both Gospels, but expressed or worded differently.

The same is true of events in the life of Jesus. In the various Gospels, the same event is described from different perspectives. Sometimes different numbers of people are involved. Two of the gospel records tell about the healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus. Matthew tells us that two blind men were healed, while Mark refers to only one. But that does not mean that one account is wrong, because the Gospels do not purport to be four attempts to give an exact transcription of the sayings and actions of Jesus. We must not come to these records imposing upon them our notions of what they ought to be and what they ought to say.

What then is the nature of the Gospels? They are divinely inspired, independently formulated narratives of the redemptive ministry and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. Written as historical narratives in story form,³ they constitute what we may call two things: portrait galleries of the King; and collected and collated sayings of the King that proclaim the good news of God’s salvation in Christ to lost sinners.⁴ The Gospels, then, are not biographies of Jesus,

3. Cf. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, WUNT 123 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

4. P. W. Smuts suggests that in this digital age it might be helpful “to think of the Gospels as edited video clips of Jesus’ life, with each Gospel writer selecting the same or different camera angles of the same incidents, or selecting different video material to narrate his distinctive record of the life and ministry of Jesus.” *Mark by the Book: A New Multidirectional Method for Understanding the Synoptic*

but accounts of representative teachings and acts of Jesus that the Holy Spirit wanted recorded. They were selected to present Him to all the world as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and as the suffering Savior who brings salvation to the world. Christ's sufferings are such a large part of the Gospels that Martin Kähler observed, with little exaggeration, that the Gospels are primarily "passion narratives with extended introductions."⁵

The Gospel writers are creative artists. Bearing in mind that "a painting, with the interpretive dimension that it affords, often can reveal the truth about a subject more effectively than a photograph," it has been rightly said that the Gospels are more like paintings than photographs.⁶ Try to picture four independent artists, each with his own gifts, his own point of view, his own creativity and style; his own peculiar use of colors, perspective, shading, and all those things that make up what we might call the individual traits of a given artist. Those of you who have studied art know there are certain characteristics of Rembrandt's paintings that are qualitatively different from those of any other painter.

Then picture, if you will, four long picture galleries named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As you walk into the picture galleries of the King, you will notice certain pictures of Christ in Matthew's gallery. When you compare those with Mark's, Luke's, or John's, you come away with two distinct convictions. You will be convinced that Matthew simply did not copy Mark's work; or Mark, Luke's; or Luke, John's; or John any combination of the others. Guided by the Spirit, each artist worked accurately and

Gospels (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2013), xvii,n. I like to use the illustration of taking photographs at Mount Rushmore from four different perspectives of the presidents carved into stone. From one perspective, all four presidents are fully in view; from another perspective only the first two are visible, while the other two perspectives catch only the opposite sides of George Washington's face.

5. Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. and ed. Carl E. Braaten (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), 80n11.

6. Donald Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 64.

independently of the others in painting his pictures of Jesus of Nazareth, the King.

But you also come away with another equally unshakeable conviction: they are all portraits of the same person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, the Savior and Lord of sinners. When you compare your impressions of Matthew's gallery with what you sense at the end of Mark's gallery, there is no way you could think or imagine that they were painting two different people. They were painting one glorious person, one glorious Savior, one glorious Redeemer. Every representation is true to life and divinely inspired, and there is no contradiction between or among them.

With few exceptions, that is how the early New Testament church viewed the four Gospels as well. As Donald Hagner writes,

The four different portraits of Jesus in the NT should be regarded as an enrichment rather than an embarrassment. With the same story told from different perspectives we are able to come to a more adequate understanding of Jesus and his message. The early church realized this and in the second century wisely resisted the temptation to follow Marcion (a mid-second-century gnostic Christian), who accepted only one gospel as canonical.... By the end of the second century the fourfold Gospel was accepted in the early church as a given. The early church certainly did not regard the Gospels, for whatever differences one might care to mention, as incompatible with one another or as presenting irreconcilable portraits of Jesus. Rather, they were perceived as enriching our understanding of Jesus.⁷

Understanding the Gospel writers as artistic productions helps resolve a number of issues related to the so-called Synoptic Gospels, such as the basic similarities but significant differences in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The word "synoptic" literally means "as seen together." The problem is that all the writers do not always see exactly the same, that is, from the same viewpoint, or with the same pair of eyes. Happily, hermeneutical perspectives,

7. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction*, 60.

or methods of interpretation, help solve these difficulties. P. W. Smuts thus proposes a multidirectional hermeneutic or method of interpretation to best understand and apply the Synoptic Gospels today. The Gospels, he says, must be read in four ways:

- *Downward*, plumbing into the theological depths of each within the context of the particular Gospel;
- *Sideways*, comparing them to each other and appreciating the various Gospel parallel traditions and emphases (as just discussed);
- *Backward*, in the context of all that has preceded them in the Old Testament; and
- *Forward*, as foundational for shedding light on the rest of the New Testament.⁸

In sum, when interpreted multidirectionally, the Synoptic “problem” becomes more of an enriching asset than a source of vexation.

3. Why were the Gospels written?

From the Gospels themselves, we discern at least five basic reasons why they were written:

First, they were written to *evangelize*. The apostle John is explicit in John 20:30–31: “Many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” John says, “I have deliberately selected my materials with a

8. Smuts, *Mark by the Book*, xv–xxii. For further help in implementing this hermeneutical model, see Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1987), and G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). For a clear, simple presentation of the Synoptic problem, see Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 54–59.

view to persuading you concerning who Christ is, and then with a view to your coming to faith in Him.”

This evangelistic purpose was particularly true in regard to the Gentiles, who were not steeped in the Old Testament and in Jewish tradition as much as the Jews were, though the Septuagint was used by God to pave the way for the gospel among the Gentiles. It got the attention and won the hearts of many Greeks, and these people often show up in the Gospels and in Acts. Nevertheless, they needed something more than oral tradition. As Donald Guthrie explains:

The Gentile mission, in fact, would have been greatly assisted by written documents for catechesis, and although the need may not have been at once recognized it must have dawned upon the missionary church at an early stage. Closely linked with catechetical requirements would have been those of apologetics. The non-Christian world would naturally want to know what kind of person Jesus was, and the urgent need for an authoritative answer is easily recognizable. Whereas...an apostolic oral witness would at first suffice, the spreading work of the gospel would soon require more permanent accounts.⁹

Second, they were written for *confirmation*. The first four verses of Luke are addressed to Theophilus. Luke concludes his Gospel by stating its purpose: “that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed” (Luke 1:4). It’s as if Luke said to Theophilus (and also to us): “You’ve heard the truths of the gospel, you’ve believed them, you’ve embraced them, but I am writing them down for you to confirm your understanding and conviction regarding these truths.” Such confirmation is vital because our salvation from sin and death is based on historic fact. If Jesus of Nazareth did not do what others said He did, and if He was not what He claimed to be, then He is no Savior, and we are not saved.

9. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 23.

Third, they were written to give *instruction*. The Gospels were written to instruct believers in the ancient church about the person and work of Christ as the basis of saving faith in the Savior and Lord. They were written to teach us what the gospel is, as well as to instruct us regarding the promises and commands of Christ that provide the content of faith and the terms of Christian discipleship. Remember how He told the apostles to make disciples by teaching them to observe whatever He commanded them (Matt. 28:18–20)? Once the apostles passed from the scene, how could the church to the end of the age observe everything Christ commanded unless what He commanded was embodied in writing?

Fourth, they were written to provide an *example*, that is, to set Christ's life before us as a pattern that we must strive to conform to. The gospels teach us that to abide in Him we must walk as He walked. How can Christ be my pattern if I don't know how He lived? How did He relate to the sick, the destitute, the downcast, and the outcast? How did He react to religious hypocrisy? If I am to walk as He walked, I must have some concrete record of how Jesus conducted Himself in every aspect of life. Only then can He become my exemplar as well as my Savior.

So in the Gospels I have the record that Christ lived as I must live. He died the death I should die for my sin. And that record of His life and death is the basis of the faith that is unto salvation. That record also shows me how to obey Him, for I may turn to the written word for whatever He has commanded. When I want to see those commands fleshed out in my own experience I turn to these Gospels, and pray, "Lord, help me to be like Thee."

Finally, they were written to be *read* in public worship. The church carried on the practice of the synagogue, giving a large place to public reading of Scripture in worship, both those we call the Old Testament, and those which would soon form the corpus of the New Testament. Guthrie writes, "It is highly probable that some account of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus would from earliest times need to be included in the forms of Christian worship. But although once again actual eyewitnesses

would, at first, well supply the lack, in the Gentile regions where direct Palestinian eyewitnesses were not available the need for written records would require no time to develop.”¹⁰

When you read the Gospels or hear them preached, how are these five purposes fulfilled in your walk with Christ? Do they evangelize you, confirm your faith, instruct you in faith, set Christ before you as a pattern, and move you to worship the triune God?

4. What is the relationship of the Gospels to the rest of the New Testament?

There are three matters to note here. First, *the Gospels are part of the New Testament documents*. They were written some thirty to fifty years after the establishment of the apostolic church throughout the Roman Empire (AD 65–85). Furthermore, we know that they are New Testament documents from the simple statement of Mark 1:1: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark says that what he is writing is good news, announcing to the world that God has done a new work in the person of His Son, for the salvation of all who truly believe in Him. The Gospel of Mark and all of the other gospel records are packed full with gospel truth, that is, the good news of the glorious person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, *the Gospels delineate and expand the apostolic preaching and teaching summarized in the book of Acts*. In the book of Acts, Luke repeatedly offers summaries of apostolic sermons. Most of those summaries take less than a minute to read. In nearly every case, those sermons rely on earlier Scripture. The apostles cite the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament and bear witness to Christ as the fulfilment of them. So Paul entered the synagogue in Thessalonica and “reasoned with them out of the scriptures, opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead, and that this Jesus, whom

10. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 23.

I preach unto you, is Christ” (Acts 17:2–3). The gospel records provide the evidence that supports this apostolic line of reasoning.

That is particularly true of Luke and Acts, a two-volume collection that serves as the historical backbone of the New Testament. Under the Spirit’s inspiration, Luke organized the history of Christ’s teachings and actions in two phases: one leading up to and culminating in the ascension of Christ (Luke); the other tracing the events that occur subsequent to the ascension of Christ (Acts). In his Gospel, Luke unveils how Christ lives, ministers, and dies, showing how He accomplishes redemption (Luke 1:68–75); in Acts, he shows how Christ, by His Word and Spirit, applies His accomplished redemption to believers, and gathers a church to Himself, “chosen for eternal life” (cf. Acts 2:47; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 54).¹¹

Once we understand this relationship between the Gospels and Acts, we should no longer wish we could have seen Jesus, the apostles, and the New Testament church with our own eyes. We have a greater privilege. In the Gospels, we have the apostolic witness forever embodied in the inspired New Testament (cf. 2 Peter 1:17–21). And in the book of Acts we have the privilege of entering into the very fellowship of the apostolic church. First John 1:3 puts it this way: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

Dear Christian, if you rightly understand the relationship of the Gospels to the rest of the New Testament, in particular to the book of Acts, you will not envy those who sat at the feet of Peter and John and heard their eyewitness testimony. For once they had spoken that Word, the apostles moved on to other places. But we may now have an apostle in our living rooms, our studies, and our kitchens who continually tells us about our Savior’s redemptive

11. This paragraph is adapted from *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, Michael P. V. Barrett, Gerald Bilkes, and Paul Smalley (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 1352.

words and actions, as well as His redemption to believers in the fellowship of the church, through the pages of the inspired Gospels.

That's why the present arrangement of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament is so effective. If the New Testament books were arranged as they were written, the first book would be James. Next would be several of Paul's letters. Only then would you have the first of the Gospels, all of which were written in the second half of the first century. But in God's kind providence, the arrangement of Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Revelation is perfectly suited for the abiding needs of the church. For what came first was the testimony of those who reported what Jesus did and said. And when new believers were gathered into communities of believers, then the epistles, which are steeped in the historic facts recorded in the Gospels and Acts, were used to confirm, instruct, guide, encourage, and rebuke these believers. So the Gospels are the historical foundation for the teaching of the epistles. It is the Gospels, as Donald Hagner notes, that "constitute the turning point and climax of salvation history. [They are] the story of God at work, fulfilling the promises to Israel and accomplishing the redemption of humanity."¹²

The epistles build upon the historic redemptive facts of the Gospels by defining the doctrines that flow out of these facts. Then they tell us how to put the truths of the gospel into practice. Thus, the New Testament as a whole teaches us propositional truths about Jesus, spells out those truths in what we call doctrine or theology, and then gives us imperatives (clear and forceful directives) on how we should live. Gospel history or truth leads to gospel doctrine, which in turn leads to gospel practice. Or, moving from effect back to cause, practice is always conditioned by and rooted in doctrine, and doctrine is always grounded in historic truth. It is this combination that makes Christianity so powerful.

12. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction*, 59.

Third, *the Gospels provide for the union of propositional truth about Jesus Christ and personal attachment to Him*. Saving faith in the gospel involves both the hearing and receiving of what theologians call propositional truth. A proposition is an assertion that is offered for consideration (as to its validity) and acceptance (as to its utility). In Christianity, a proposition is a truth set forth which, when proven from Scripture, is to be fully believed in the mind and wholeheartedly embraced in a Christian's life and practice. No one can become a Christian who does not hear, affirm, and practice certain propositional truths.

Consider 1 Corinthians 15:1-2: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain." Paul is saying, "I'm going to go back over the gospel that I proclaimed to you, the gospel you received, the gospel in which you stand, the gospel by which you are saved. If you receive it and abide or stand in it, you are saved by that truth." Thus, the hearing and wholehearted reception and adherence to such propositional truth is necessary for salvation.

Paul then presents the gospel in particular propositions. "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." The first propositional truth is, "that Christ died for our sins," an historical event. Verse 4a then adds, "that He was buried," proving that He was really dead. Paul then announces another propositional truth: "that He rose again the third day" (v. 4b). The same Christ who died, whose body was buried in the tomb came out of that tomb on the third day. The resurrection is not an idea; it was a physical body that died on the cross, that then went into and came out of the tomb. Paul is saying, as it were: "If you receive and affirm these propositions as truth with mind and soul, and hold on to them, you will be saved. Cease to receive them and live by them, and you will be damned! There is no Christianity without these foundational, propositional truths." Paul thus concludes in

verse 17: “And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.” You are guilty, condemned, lost, hopeless!

Christianity involves the hearing and wholehearted reception and retention of propositional truth. But saving faith in Christ also involves entering into and remaining in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That’s why Mark does not begin his Gospel by saying, “The beginning of the gospel of saving propositional truth.” Though it is that, it is more than that. It is news of a person, the Son of God, who must be known and experienced. Hence Mark says, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Likewise, John 1:12 says: “As many as received him [not just propositions about Him] “to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, even to them who believe on his name.” Or consider Colossians 2:6: “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him.” Christ did not say, “Come to the propositions about Me,” but said, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He also promised, “Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.” And He stated firmly, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” Saving faith unites the complete believer, body and soul, to the complete person of the Redeemer.

So we must enter into a personal relationship with Christ and remain in Him. Jesus says, “Abide in me...if a man abide not in me he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:4, 6). Christ gives Himself to us in His Word and by His Spirit. In obedience to that Word, and by that same Spirit, we give ourselves to Him. Being saved is not just a once-for-all decision to receive Christ. If the attachment is real from the start, it will be an abiding attachment. These, then, are foundational elements for a saving relationship with Christ.

The Gospels are important, for they provide us with the necessary materials for the union of propositional truth about Jesus Christ and personal attachment to Him. We are not called to be

attached to a person who is unknown or undefined or who comes to us in a cloud of mystery. Christian faith is not an irrational leap in the dark, or a mere feeling of dependence on we know not what.

Marriage is serious business. I'm not going to pledge to love, cherish, and nourish some unknown person or commodity. Likewise, God does not call upon us to enter into personal attachment to an unknown Christ. He has given us the Gospels to tell us about Christ the King. He says, "Would you be married to my Son? Consider Him. This is my beloved Son. Look at Him in all the humiliation of His incarnation. Look at Him in His development from infancy to boyhood, and then to manhood. Look at Him identifying Himself with sinners as He is baptized. Look at Him speaking peace to troubled seas, binding the devil, casting out demons, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, seeking and saving the lost, and proclaiming the kingdom of God. Listen as He speaks with such power and grace that even His enemies wonder at the words that proceed from His lips. Hear Him thunder against pride, greed, and hypocrisy. Hear Him inviting the neediest sinner to come to Him. Behold Him as He receives publicans and harlots. In effect, His Father testifies of Christ's worth, saying, "This is My beloved Son. When I call you to personal attachment I do not call you to some unknown or undefined mystical Christ. I call you to the Christ who appeared on earth in the fullness of time, and is proclaimed to you in the facts and propositional truth of the gospel."

God also says, "I do not call you to accept mere propositional truth without the union of your person with Christ's person." Saving faith is not mere historical faith, the mere affirmation that the facts recorded in the Gospels are true. The true believer says, "I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. I am called a Christian because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of His anointing. I am His, and He is mine."¹³ Merely believing the

13. Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 1, 32; Song of Solomon 2:16, 6:3.

propositional truth about Christ is not enough; you must also be personally joined to Him, submit to Him, follow where He leads, and become conformed to His image.

The Gospels provide the material for this fusion of propositional truth and personal attachment through an experiential knowledge of Jesus Christ. No verse in the Gospels better illustrates this than John 17:3, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."

What a privilege it is to have the four Gospels in our hands! Do you believe their propositional truths? Are you personally attached to Christ, who is the essence of all the truth these propositions convey, indeed, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6)? Can you say with the apostle Paul, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21)?

You ought to be deeply concerned about your soul if Christ is not your Savior and Lord, and if you have never seen such beauty in Him that nothing else will satisfy. Likewise, if you have walked through the galleries of the King's four Gospels all your life without forming a personal attachment to the King, you are in a dangerous condition. Christ will not save you unless you repent of your sin and unbelief, and surrender in faith to the King of kings.

My friend, go back to God's four gospel records about His Son, and cry to God to give you eyes to see what is really there: the very glory of God shining in the face of Jesus. In the coming months, as we walk up and down the gallery of the Gospel of Mark, I pray that your soul will find no rest until the Holy Spirit makes Christ so indispensable as your Savior and so beautiful as your Lord and King that you will fall at His feet and cry out, "Lord Jesus, give me Thyself, or else I die!"

Meanwhile, let me lovingly warn you: if in this life you do not come to see Christ as your Savior in "the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," the first time you will see Him as He really is will be on Judgment Day, when you will see Him as your Judge. Then you will know that He is exactly who He claimed to be in the four Gospels: the One whom God has made both Lord and Christ, and

the Judge of the living and the dead. Oh, seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near!

5. How should we approach our study of the Gospels, particularly the study of Mark?

Three words tell us how to study the Gospel of Mark: *reverence*, *dependence*, and *expectancy*. Let us briefly examine each.

We should first study this Gospel with *reverence*. This involves profound honor, deep respect, holy awe, and godly fear. We ought to approach the Gospels in general with reverence and Mark in particular, realizing that we are handling the infallible, “God-breathed” Word, the living and active Word that can make us and keep us “wise unto salvation.” Jesus Himself was aware of the need for reverence in handling God’s eternal and abiding Word. “Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away” (Mark 13:31). Jesus was profoundly conscious that the very words He used to express the mind of God were stamped with the abiding truth and trustworthiness of the word of God. Thus we must approach the exposition of the Gospel of Mark with profound reverence, coming to God’s house as humble students and believers of God’s Word rather than as judges and critics of that Word.

We also should study the Gospels with reverence because we will be held accountable on the Judgment Day for this inestimable privilege. Jesus says to His disciples in Matthew 13:17, “For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them [the deeds of Jesus]; and to hear those things which ye hear [the words of Jesus], and have not heard them.” Comparatively few people in world history have had the privilege of sitting under a sound exposition of the Gospels of Jesus Christ. What a privilege, but also what a responsibility you thus have. All the sermons you hear about the words Christ spoke and about the deeds He performed in the Gospel of Mark will revisit you on Judgment Day. Your eternal destiny will be formally and publicly announced before the universe by the very One who is set before us in Mark’s

picture gallery of the Savior King. Will you then not bow in reverence before the exposition of this Gospel?

Second, our approach to the Gospels must be marked by a spirit and attitude of *dependence*. We might be tempted to think that walking through the picture galleries of the King will automatically overwhelm and captivate people who behold His beauty. Furthermore, we might be tempted to think that mere exposure to His words of power and grace will automatically bring us under His sway. Would God it were so, but it is not. The truth is that we are dependent upon God for the powerful assistance of the Holy Spirit as we study the gospel records to know what they mean for us.

By nature, we reject the Word of God, both in its written form, the Bible, and in its living form, the Lord Jesus Christ. We hate the light, and love the darkness, preferring ignorance and rejecting knowledge. Only the light of God can enlighten our darkness. Only the work of the Spirit can overcome our natural enmity to the truth; “no man can say [confess] that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Cor. 12:3). When Peter answers Christ’s question about His identity by saying, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus tells Peter, “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 16:17).

You and I are utterly dependent upon the Spirit to give us ears to hear what the Gospel of Mark has to say. So we must approach our study in an attitude of dependence upon God, that He would grant us present and powerful assistance through the Holy Spirit. That attitude must incite us to earnest and persistent prayer so we can receive the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), to a vigorous repudiation of all confidence in ourselves or in the preacher (Jer. 17:5), and to confession of sin and mortification of all that would resist, grieve, or quench the Spirit.

Third, we must approach the study of Mark with *expectancy*. When parents are expecting a child, they eagerly await the due date of that baby. Likewise, when we speak about examining the truth of the Gospels with expectancy, we do so with eager

anticipation of the presence of the Holy Spirit to take the Word and apply it to our minds and souls so as to save us and to transform and conform us to the image of Christ.

So, as we study in the Gospel of Mark we should come with an expectancy born of the conviction that this record of Christ's life, deeds, death, and resurrection is not being expounded merely as an intellectual exercise or historical inquiry. Rather, we expect that God's Spirit will take Mark's account and so apply it to us in truth and reality that we would have heart dealings with this Christ. Then we will not merely admire the grace of Him in saying to the paralytic let down through the roof by his four friends, "Thy sins be forgiven thee," but we will long to hear Him say to us as well: "Son, thy sins be forgiven *thee*." The faithfully recorded words of Mark will then become words of life to our hearts and lives.

My unsaved friend, what we will proclaim to you is not mere opinion or philosophy, but the facts about a living person, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). We will tell you about Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God, who lived a perfect life, died a sinner's death, was buried, and was raised from the dead. By His Spirit, through the preaching of the Word, Christ calls you to Himself now as surely as He once stood on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and said, "Peter, James and John, follow me." He comes to you in His own Word and by His Spirit, and says, "Follow me. Come into living, trustful attachment to my Person. And in that attachment all the virtue of My work will be yours. My God will be your God, My righteousness will be your righteousness; My death for sin will be your death to sin; My resurrection, your resurrection; My life will be your life."

To you, dear believers, what determines whether or not we are growing in grace? Is it not the degree to which, in your own experience, you maintain true, living, vital communion with Jesus Christ by the Spirit who dwells in Christ as the Head, and in you as the members of His body? Is it not true in your experience that when He is near and precious, everything else seems to fall into place, and life is good? But when He becomes distant, and

anything or any other person rivals His affection, do you not experience that everything gets cloudy, and you lose your way?

May we take up the study of the Gospel of Mark, with such grace in our hearts, that beholding our mighty Lord and faithful Savior in the mirror of His Word, we shall know Him and love Him as we never have before, and be made all the more willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him. May we come to the Gospel of Mark with reverent hearts, fearing God, affirming the truth of His Word, depending on the help of the Holy Spirit, and expecting Him to lead us into all truth, so that we may grow in the knowledge and grace of “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1).