



Lecture #3, Part 1

## The Gospels and The Synoptic Problem The Literary Relationship of Matthew, Mark, and Luke

### Theme:

*Christians before the 18th Century entertained few doubts that the Gospels were to be read as historically reliable accounts of the life of Jesus. The main problem to be faced was that of harmonization.*

### Introduction

The **Synoptic Problem** is not really a “**problem**” in the normal sense of the term. It is simply a way to refer to questions and possible explanations about the literary relationships between the first three New Testament Gospels. The word “**synoptic**” means “**with the same eye**” or “**seeing together.**” [Matthew](#), [Mark](#), and [Luke](#) present the basic story of Jesus in similar ways, including the order of the material, the stories told, the sayings of Jesus, even using many of the same words in parallel accounts. For this reason they are called the **Synoptic Gospels**. On the other hand, while the [Gospel of John](#) sometimes resembles the other three Gospels, it tells the story of Jesus in significantly different ways, including a different order of events, different perspectives and points of emphasis, and with its own unique vocabulary and style. Those differences can be understood in terms other than literary relationships between the Gospels, *which is the reason John is not included in the Synoptic Problem.*

To someone who has never studied the Gospels closely, or who has assumed certain logically constructed theories about the nature of Scripture apart from looking at the actual biblical text (for example, the absolute inerrancy of Scripture), questions about the literary relationship between the Gospels may be unnerving at first. It is easy simply to reject them as so much scholarly speculation and academic conjecture. Yet, these questions arise from the biblical text itself, questions obvious to most anyone who takes the time to examine the biblical text closely. If we are honestly to hear and understand Scripture on its own terms, we will have to come to terms with this issue in ways that go beyond simply denying that there is any issue because of a certain theology or ideology about Scripture.

On the other hand, we need honestly to concede at the beginning that there is no final answer to this “**problem.**” There are various perspectives, hypotheses, and theories based on the evidence of the biblical text as well as what we know about the process of writing. But there is not a “**correct**” answer. That simply suggests that while we need to take this issue seriously as part of what we see in the biblical text as we have it, it is not a matter of faith one way or the other. Rather, it is simply being honest with the biblical text and not trying to make it say or be what it is not. It is also acknowledging that we do not have to have all of the answers to our logical questions before we can accept the Bible as Scripture for the Church. The issue is not a matter of believing or not believing the Bible;



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it is a matter of believing, and then seeking to understand as best we can that which we believe (“**faith seeking understanding**”).

So, one might ask why we should bother with the issue at all if there is no “**correct**” solution to a “**problem**” that is not an essential matter of Christian Faith. Here we return to a simple principle that grew out of the Protestant reformation, the principle of *sola scriptura*, “**only Scripture.**”

This principle, as one of the cornerstones of the Reformation, held that Scripture should be the first and final authority for the faith and practice of the Church, and that it should be allowed to stand in judgment over all human creeds, doctrines, and traditions.

As that principle worked out in the history of the church in the centuries following the Reformation, it meant a rigorous honesty with how Scripture was studied. The goal was to hear the Bible as Scripture for the church, neither in isolation from the traditions of the Faith nor captive to them. This allowed the development of critical methodologies for the investigation of Scripture that included a careful and detailed reading of the biblical texts for what they actually said apart from the doctrines that told people what they should mean. This did not deny the authority of the Bible as the inspired word of God. In fact, it affirmed it even more strongly. But it did allow the biblical text to be seen as something more than a repository of timeless and unchanging truths written by the finger of God.

While not always as successful in objectivity as envisioned, these critical methods allowed the tremendous diversity of the biblical text to emerge, a diversity that had been masked for many centuries by dogmatic and doctrinal approaches that sought to harmonize any differences in the biblical text. The rich texture of the biblical traditions emerged as the witness of various communities of faith over many centuries to God's self-revelation in their history came to light (see **Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture which will be studied later**). Like an elegant tapestry, the Bible could be viewed on a broad scale as a marvelous record of God's dealing with humanity, the story of God in striking panorama. Yet, on closer inspection, the tremendous complexity of the fabric and the threads that created the larger picture could now be seen. Biblical study then turned to the careful examination of these strands as a way to help understand the larger picture.

So, an understanding of the “**synoptic problem**” is a crucial first step in any detailed study of the Gospels and their testimony to Jesus the Christ, simply because it allows us to begin with the witness of the biblical text itself. That will not assure a student of the New Testament that everything s/he concludes will be unbiased and objective. But it will encourage us to listen to the text, to take it seriously even in all its diversity, and will constantly warn us against a too easy and perhaps unconscious manipulation of Scripture for any particular theological agenda.



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## The “Problem”

**The Synoptic Gospels** share a great deal of material and features. There are differences between them in many areas, some more pronounced than others. Yet, all the questions about the differences arise precisely because of the otherwise close parallels between the Synoptics. While we might be able to answer some of these questions about differences as a matter of context, culture, personality, or purpose, the parallels are not as easily explained. The questions that arise about the literary relationships between the Synoptic Gospels concern both the differences as well as the similarities, although the similarities really focus the questions.

So, the **Synoptic Problem** is the way that serious students of the Gospels attempt to understand the origins and interrelationships of the first three Gospels that will explain both the similarities and the differences between them.