

No.5, Four Gospels

Thus far our studies on this subject of *An Introduction to the NT* have been of a background nature. We have given some consideration to some historical detail with respect to the manner in which the Lord prepared the way for the NT era, with the life and work of Christ, the ministry of the Apostles, the formation & witness of the NT Church, and the writing of the New Testament Scriptures. Today we wish to move into the literary aspect of this study and begin to have a look at the literature that comprises the NT. We are aware that there are 27 books in the NT and they fall into various sections

- (a) The four Gospels – Matthew to John
- (b) The Acts of the Apostles – giving an historical summary of events in the progress & development of the Church following Christ's ascension and Pentecost.
- (c) The letters to various churches – Romans to 2 Thessalonians
- (d) The pastoral epistles – 1 & 2 Timothy & Titus
- (e) The general epistles – Philemon to Jude. They are general in that they are not addressed to one particular congregation but to the Church as a whole. While *Philemon* was sent by Paul to a man of that name we will include it under this section of general epistles.
- (f) The Apocalypse – i.e. the book of Revelation. This book is often referred to as *The Apocalypse* for the simple reason that the Greek word for "revelation" is *apokalupsis*. Thus, the content of the last book of the NT is *apocalyptic* in that it is a revelation of Christ the King with regard to events that lead up to His second advent and on into the eternal state.

THE ORDER OF THE NT BOOKS

In the compilation of the NT Scriptures the four gospels stand at the beginning. This is not because they were actually written first. The order of books in our NT is not chronological; i.e. not according to the order of time in the sense of the when they were written. It is a fact that no one really knows the precise dates when the books were written. But reliable NT historians and scholars would agree that most likely the first NT book ever to be written was *James* not *Matthew*; and that *Galatians* & *1&2 Thessalonians* were Paul's first letters written before *Romans*. Thus, while no one can be sure of the exact dates of the writing of these books we can be sure that the order in the NT is not chronological.

Instead, the order of the books is designed to present a biographical picture of events that revolve around Christ. The theme of the NT is *Christ* as it is with respect to all Scripture. The person and work of Christ, therefore, is the unifying theme of the NT Scriptures. Consequently, the order of the books is designed to reflect the history of the Christ of the NT and the history of His Church, along with presenting the doctrine that flows out of that history.

We must always keep in mind that doctrinal truth is based on historical facts. Moreover, those historical facts that pertain to Christ are bathed in the supernatural. Christ was born as a true man, lived in this world, exercised His ministry, and did the work that He was commissioned to do – all of this is historically true. But all of it is set in the atmosphere of the supernatural. His birth, His life, His death, His resurrection cannot be understood apart from the miraculous, yet these events are historically true. We do not accept the position of the liberals who reject anything supernatural as truly historical. They do not believe in the supernatural, thus they reject the history of Christ in the NT. They claim that they are on a quest to find "the historical Jesus" which sounds to the unwary very plausible and pious. But it is a devilish rejection of the NT Scriptures and especially the four Gospels. It is in them that we have the inspired historical record of the miraculous life of Christ. They show clearly that the supernatural and the historical are compatible.

WHY FOUR GOSPELS

The first four books of the NT are the four Gospels – four individual and independent records of the person of Christ and His work. But why four books that essentially tell the same story? The answer is plain – the four Gospels were written by four different authors under the Spirit's inspiration in order to meet specific needs within Christ's Church. The four Gospels are written to God's people in order to address particular aspects of the person and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ that the Church needs to know. Therefore, the Gospels are *apologetic* in nature. They are an historical presentation of Christ's person and work. Each Gospel presents a very clear line of thought concerning Christ, necessary to meet the spiritual needs of the Lord's people. Christ is the main figure – who He is, what He did, what He taught, His interpretation and application of the OT, His death, burial and His resurrection. All is centred on His person & His work. But each Gospel has its own particular emphasis with regard to Christ.

THREE AND ONE

As noted there are four Gospels. In Scripture there is significance in numbers; and 4 in the Bible breaks down into 3 and 1. Three is the *divine number*; e.g. the Trinity. It is also the *number of completeness*; e.g. the resurrection that brought Christ's redemptive work to completeness. One is the number of *unity*. Thus, taking these thoughts the Gospels give us a view of Christ in whom all of the divine attributes are united, Col 2: 9. This is the message of the Gospel – He is the fulness of the Godhead bodily. As the Godman He has united within Himself all needed to save men from their sins.

Then there is another reason for this breakdown into 3 and 1 with respect to the four Gospels; namely, that the first 3 stand together as study will show, while John stands by itself in a certain sense. From this perspective, the first 3 are known as *the synoptic Gospels*. The word "synoptic" is a combination of two Greek words that mean *to view together*, or *to see from the one perspective*.

There are clear differences between the synoptic Gospels and John's Gospel. The synoptic Gospels are written more from an earthly standpoint, emphasising the humanity of Christ. In them the material is largely biographical taking in a comparatively large section of His life from His birth to crucifixion, with the action being mainly centred on Galilee. John is written from the heavenly standpoint with the emphasis decidedly on Christ's deity, cf. ch. 1: 1. The material is doctrinal, with the focus being on the words of Christ rather than His acts. John's Gospel is restricted principally to the closing part of Christ's ministry and is mainly centred on Jerusalem.