

THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS (5201A)

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this course is familiarize students with the critical methods used to study the Synoptic Gospels, and to instill an understanding of each Gospel's historical origin, literary structure, content, and theological nuances.

II. GOALS

Our goal is that by acquiring sufficient knowledge of the Gospels and the methods used to study them, that each student will be able to critically study the Gospels on their own so that they can derive well-founded theological principles for application in the church and the world.

III. COURSE TEXTBOOKS

A. Required Texts

1. Perkins, Pheme. *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
2. Green, Joel B. and Scot McKnight, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992.
3. Bible. Please use one of the following translations: the New Revised Standard Version, the New Jerusalem Bible, or the New American Bible.

B. Recommended Texts

1. Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.
2. Throckmorton, Burton H. *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992.

C. Additional Reading

Additional essays and journal articles will be assigned for each class session. See the reading schedule below.

IV. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A. Reading Assignments

Reading assignments are listed on the course schedule below. Important topics and issues from the reading are likely to appear on the exam.

B. Writing Project

The writing assignment for this class will be a paper comparing a series of passages in the synoptic tradition:

- The Beelzebub Controversy: Matt 12:22–30; Mark 3:22–27; Luke 11:14–23
- The Sin against the Holy Spirit: Matt 12:31–32; Mark 3:28–30; Luke 12:10
- The Good and Bad Trees and Fruits: Matt 12:33–37
- The Return of the Evil Spirit: Matt 12:43–45 and Luke 11:24–26
- True Blessedness: Luke 11:27–28
- The Sign of Jonah: Matt 12:38–42; Mark 8:11–12; Luke 11:29–32

(1) The first part of this assignment is to color-code the passages to be studied by underlining places where the gospels agree in wording.

- Triple Tradition (words occurring in Matt, Mark, and Luke), underline in blue.
- Double Tradition (words occurring in only Matt and Luke), underline in red.
- For words that occur only in Matt and Mark, underline these in yellow (or black).
- For words that occur only in Mark and Luke, underline these in green.

(2) The second part of this assignment is to write a paper (1500–2500 words) analyzing this series of passages as they appear in Matt, Mark, and Luke. The purpose of this paper is to understand how each gospel writer put these passages together in order to present them to the reader, and to understand the nuances of each gospel writer’s theology.

The majority of the paper should analyze the synoptic relationship of these passages. In particular, you might want to wrestle with the following questions:

- How can we explain the agreement of Matthew and Luke against Mark?
 - In the Beelzubub Controversy, there are a number of places where the wording of Matt and Luke agree against Mark (e.g., Matt 12:25–26; Mark 3:23–26; Luke 11:17–18). This is very unusual in the synoptic gospels. How can we explain this agreement against Mark?
 - In Mark, the Beelzubub Controversy and the Sign of Jonah appear in very different parts of his gospel (chapters 3 and 8), but in Matt and Luke they are placed close together. How can we explain this?
 - By placing the Beelzubub Controversy next to the Sign of Jonah, does this change how we should read/interpret either of these incidents?
- In “The Return of the Evil Spirit” (Matt 12:43–45 and Luke 11:24–26), where there is no Markan material, why do Matthew and Luke so closely agree, whereas in the other sections they only moderately agree?
- Why has Luke inserted the episode on True Blessedness (Luke 11:27–28) at this point in his gospel? How does this location for this pericope affect its meaning? How does it lend meaning to the surrounding texts?
- After the Beelzubub Controversy, Matt and Mark have a discussion of Sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt 12:31–32; Mark 3:28–30). In Luke, this discussion has been moved to a different context (Luke 12:10). Why has Luke moved this pericope?
- In Matt 12:33–37, Matthew has inserted a pericope on good and bad fruits between the Sin against the Holy Spirit and the Sign of Jonah. Why has Matthew put this material here?
- Why do Matthew and Luke differ in their order of this material? Matthew has The Beelzubub Controversy then the Sign of Jonah and then the Return of the Evil Spirit. Luke has the Beelzubub Controversy, the Return of the Evil Spirit, and then the Sign of Jonah. How does this difference in order affect the meaning? How can we explain that Matt and Luke have these three pericopes in roughly the same location (which disagrees with Mark) but they have arranged them in different orders?

This is only a sample list of questions. I strongly encourage you to really get into these passages and ask your own probing questions in order to figure out why each gospel writer is constructing their text the way that they do and what they are trying to communicate to the reader.

A minority part of the paper, perhaps 250-500 words, should focus on the specific nuances of each gospel’s account. You will want to consider at least three things: (1) what subtle meaning does each gospel writer convey by ordering these passages the way that they do? (2) Both Matthew and Luke, at times, change the wording of their source material (either Mark or Q)—how does this affect the message they are trying to convey? (3) In these passages, each gospel writer has material that is unique to their own gospel. How does this unique material shape the meaning of their message?

C. Visual Presentation

During the last two sessions of class, each student will be responsible for presenting a 15–20 minute visual presentation (followed by a short Q&A time) on a particular topic related to the Synoptic Gospels. The purpose of this assignment is to practically prepare students for

researching and presenting Gospel related topics to interested parishioners and fellow clergymen (for this assignment, assume that this is your target audience).

Your presentation will be graded on substance (research), the quality of the presentation (your oral delivery, your effectiveness and communication, and the appeal of your visual material), and your time management. This is not strictly an academic research project, so I am not expecting you to go into scholarly minutia, but I want to see that you have an overall grasp of the issues so that you come across as competent when you speak. I would also strongly encourage you to make your presentation interesting and visually appealing to the audience (part of presenting anything is keeping the audience's attention!).

PowerPoint is the default medium of choice, but you are free to be creative and use other media as well. Feel free to use public domain artwork (Google Images is wonderful). There is also the Artstor searchable digital archive available as a UWO library database.

Before you begin work on a presentation topic, please clear that topic with me first.

Possible Topics:

- The use of the Gospels in Liberation Theology
- Modern interpretations of Peter in the Gospels (of particular interest might be how Catholics and Protestants have different interpretations of Matt 16:18–19)
- The message of salvation in one or more of the gospels (i.e., what is the soteriology of a particular Gospel)
- A particular theme of social justice in the Gospels (e.g. The Gospel's view of social oppression, wealth, religious oppression, etc.)
- The view of women in the Gospels
- The debate over the historicity of the resurrection in the Gospels
- The view of the Roman Empire in one or more of the Gospels
- The “Cost of Discipleship” in the Gospels (e.g., one might want to look at the interpretation of the Gospels in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book)
- Modern interpretations of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse in Matt 24–25
- The view of Jews, Israel, and Judaism in one of the Gospels
- A comparison of Christology in two or more Gospels
- If you need additional ideas, you might want to look over the Table of Contents at the end of the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. There are a lot of potential presentation topics here.

D. Quizzes and/or Exams

There will be a comprehensive final exam for this class, which will cover the entire content of the course, including lecture material and reading.

V. WEIGHING OF COURSE REQUIREMENTS FOR MARKING

The student's grade for this class will be determined by their participation in class (which includes completion of the assigned reading) and their performance on the writing project, the audio/visual presentation, and the final exam. As mentioned above, the final exam will cover both lecture and reading material.

Participation in class and completion of the assigned reading	10%
Writing project	30%
Visual Presentation	30%
Final Exam	30%

VI. COURSE LECTURES AND ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

Date	Lecture Topic	Reading
Sept 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the Academic Study of the Gospels for Application in the Church • Historical Context of the Gospels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Instruction Concerning the Historical Truth of the Gospels” Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 21, 1964) and analysis by Joseph Fitzmyer <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_HistTruthFitzmyer.htm#FitzmyerArticle ○ Read the <i>Instruction</i> first and then Fitzmyer’s comments. • Raymond E. Brown, <i>An Introduction to the New Testament</i>, 99–125 • PHEME PERKINS, <i>Synoptic Gospels</i>, chapter 1
Sept 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early History of the Gospels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perkins, <i>Synoptic Gospels</i>, chapters 2 and 7 • Lee Martin McDonald, “The Gospels in Early Christianity: Their Origin, Use, and Authority,” in <i>Reading the Gospels Today</i> (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 150–78. • <i>Didache</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0714.htm • <i>Gospel of Thomas</i>, §1–22, 100–114 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gthlamb.html ○ If you have time, read the entire text of <i>Gos. Thom.</i> • <i>Gospel of Peter</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelpeter-brown.html • <i>Protoevangelium of James</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0847.htm
Sept 20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Formation of the Written Gospels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Dei Verbum</i> §V.18–19 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html ○ According to <i>Dei Verbum</i>, how did the Gospels come to be written down? ○ What does it mean that the Gospels are “true”? • Perkins, <i>Synoptic Gospels</i>, chapter 3. • In <i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i>, read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Synoptic Problem” ○ “Q” ○ “M Tradition” ○ “L Tradition” • Color-code the synoptic parallel (discussed above under the Writing Project)
Sept 27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Critical Study of the Gospels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., “Historical Criticism: Its Role in Biblical Interpretation and Church Life,” <i>Theological Studies</i> 50 (1989): 244–59. • “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” Presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993. • Lee Martin McDonald and Stanley E. Porter, <i>Early Christianity and Its Sacred Literature</i>, 23–37. • In <i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i>, read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Textual Criticism” ○ “Form Criticism” ○ “Redaction Criticism” ○ “Literary Criticism”

Oct 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the Gospel of Mark 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brown, <i>An Introduction to the New Testament</i>, 126–70. • Perkins, <i>Synoptic Gospels</i>, chapter 4.
Oct 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Character and Theology of Mark 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In <i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i>, read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Mark, Gospel of” • Read the Gospel of Mark <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ If possible, read the entire Gospel in one sitting. ◦ Think about the unique features of this Gospel ◦ What message (or messages) is the Evangelist trying to communicate?
Oct 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brown, <i>An Introduction to the New Testament</i>, 171–224. • Perkins, <i>Synoptic Gospels</i>, chapter 5.
Oct 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Character and Theology of Matthew, Part 1 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In <i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i>, read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Matthew, Gospel of” • Read the Gospel of Matthew <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ If possible, read the entire Gospel in one sitting. ◦ Think about the unique features of this Gospel ◦ What message (or messages) is the Evangelist trying to communicate?
Nov 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Character and Theology of Matthew, Part 2: The Sermon on the Mount 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Summarize in one or two sentences the main point/message of the sermon. • In <i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i>, read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Sermon on the Mount/Plain” • Loyd Allen, “The Sermon on the Mount in the History of the Church,” <i>Review and Expositor</i> 89 (1992): 245–62.
Nov 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the Gospel of Luke 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brown, <i>An Introduction to the New Testament</i>, 225–78. • Perkins, <i>Synoptic Gospels</i>, chapter 6.
Nov 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Character and Theology of Luke 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In <i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i>, read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Luke, Gospel of” • Read the Gospel of Luke <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ If possible, read the entire Gospel in one sitting. ◦ Think about the unique features of this Gospel ◦ What message (or messages) is the Evangelist trying to communicate?
Nov 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Search for the “Historical Jesus” • The Gospels Today: Opportunities and Challenges • Presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In <i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i>, read: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “Historical Jesus, Quest of” • Brown, <i>An Introduction to the New Testament</i>, 817–30.
Nov 29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations 	
TBA	Final Exam	