



BI522 The Gospels

Syllabus

Instructor: Michael Morrison

Course Description

This course examines the four canonical Gospels to see what each of these four portraits of Jesus tells us. Students will explore the literary and theological relationships between the Gospels, and the major themes each one presents. Students will describe how the teachings of Jesus can be used in our very different circumstances today.

Required textbooks

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Read them in a scholarly translation such as the ESV, NIV or NRSV, not a paraphrase.¹

Strauss, Mark L. *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020. ISBN: 978-0310528678. Price for a new book: \$37. Kindle, \$41. A good introduction to basic information about the Gospels – author, date, primary themes, and other foundations for interpretation.²

¹ Although Eugene Peterson was a good scholar, *The Message* was not designed for scholarly study. Nor is the Passion, the Mirror, the New Living Translation, etc. These are miniature commentaries in disguise.

² The [first edition](#), from 2007, may also be used, and it costs a little less. Although the new edition is about 100 pages longer, most of the text is the same. The publisher notes the following changes: expanded discussion on the progress of Mark's narrative;

Wright, N.T. *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters*. New York: HarperOne, 2011; paperback, 2018. ISBN [978-0062084408](https://www.harpercollins.com/9780062084408). Approximate price: \$14. 256 pages.

Links go to bookfinder.com, where you may find lower prices.

Recommended resources

Green, Joel B., Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd edition. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013. You can view parts of the first edition at <http://goo.gl/9R7cbI>.

Wright, N.T. *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*. New York: HarperOne, 2012. 304 pages. See his *You're Included* interviews, <https://learn.gcs.edu/course/view.php?id=58#section-36>

Stein, Robert. *New Testament Survey – Gospels*. 20 audio lectures, posted at <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/new-testament-survey-1/robert-stein>.

Student learning outcomes for BI522

Students will be able to:

1. List the distinctive teachings of each of the four Gospels, and describe how each contributes to a more complete picture of who Jesus was, and what he said and did.
2. Explain the challenges involved in using the Gospels as sources of historical information, and give a reasoned response to the challenges.

over 125 new images, maps and charts; new theories on the Synoptic problem, performance criticism, geography and ethnicities, and expanded bibliography.

3. Describe scholarly proposals about the literary relationships between the Synoptic Gospels.
4. Analyze a passage in the Gospels in light of its historical and literary setting, to describe its message for the original readers.
5. Describe the cultural and theological differences between Jesus' circumstances and our own, and explain how his teachings are useful in the church today despite those differences.

Requirements

1. **The textbooks.** The pages assigned in the textbooks total about 800 pages; we expect the average student to take about 50 hours to read the books – that's about 4½ hours each week.
2. **Several lessons each week.** Lessons will be posted each Monday for the first ten weeks. See the *Academic Catalog*, section VI, for study suggestions. If you read the lessons carefully, and take notes, the quizzes will be easy. The lessons average about 24 pages each week, and we expect that you will spend about 2 hours each week on them.
3. **Six forum discussions:** For six of the ten weeks, a question will be posted on Monday; students must make an initial comment by Thursday, and they must reply to at least one other student by the end of Sunday.
4. **Three quizzes.** There will be three open-book quizzes, about the lessons and assigned readings.
5. **One exegetical paper, done in three parts:** Students may choose one of four passages for the focus of these papers; the options are listed in the document on the class website, "How to Write the First Paper." Some students need the detailed instructions more than others do, but please follow the instructions. It will help you analyze the passage in a systematic way, and it will help me read and grade the papers in a consistent way.

- a. First, a 5-page paper on the historical and literary setting of the passage. Students must consult and use at least two modern³ scholarly books, not counting the assigned textbooks for this class. Students may need to obtain these books through an interlibrary loan, so they should select a passage and identify potential resources as soon as the class begins. As explained in BI501, good resources are available on the internet.
- b. Second, a 5-page paper analyzing key words and the original message of the passage. Students must consult and use at least three modern scholarly books, not counting the textbooks for this class, including at least two modern, major⁴ commentaries. Significant portions of some commentaries can be read online. See the document “How to Write the Second Paper” for further details.
- c. Last, a 4-page paper discussing how the passage is relevant in our own context, either in theology and/or in ethics. Outside research is permitted but not required for this paper. See the document “How to Write the Third Paper” for further details.

³ “Modern” means written within the last 25 years. This does not mean that older books are bad. They can often be very helpful. However, new information or analyses will sometimes help us see that a new interpretation is better. If we do not consult more recent commentaries, we may be unwittingly perpetuating a mistake. The newer books often retain the best of the older ones, but occasionally introduce new errors.

⁴ Major means at least 15 pages for each chapter in the Gospel you are studying. See lists posted at <https://sites.google.com/view/biblestudyresources/gospels>.

Assignments, estimated hours, and grade weighting

| Assignment | Hours ⁵ | Percentage of grade |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Reading the website documents | 22 | |
| Reading discussions and making responses | 6 | 15 |
| Taking quizzes | 3 | 10 |
| Reading the textbooks | 45 | |
| Studying for the quizzes | 3 | |
| Writing first two papers | 50 | 50 |
| Writing third paper | 8 | 25 |
| Total – about 12 hours each week | 137 | 100 |

⁵ This is an estimate for the “average” student. Some students will complete the course requirements in less total time, and some will take more time.

Weekly Topics and Assignments

| Week | Dates in 2023 | Lesson topics | Reading assignments (highest priority first) | Forum or quiz |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 1 | May 15 | What is a Gospel? What is the Synoptic Problem? | Strauss, chapters 1-2; Wright, chapters 1-3 | F |
| 2 | May 22 | The Gospel of Mark – its structure, features, and its secret | Strauss, chapters 7, 3, & 4 | Q |
| Quiz 1 should be taken before the end of Sunday. | | | | |
| 3 | May 29 | How do we interpret and use parables? | Strauss, section about parables (1st edition, pp. 447-51; 2nd ed. 538-544), and chapters 5-6; Wright, chapter 4 | F |
| 4 | June 5 | The Gospel of Matthew – a Jewish anti-Jewish Gospel | Strauss, chapters 8, 13-14 | |
| The first paper is due by the end of Sunday. | | | | |
| 5 | June 12 | What is the kingdom of God/heaven? | Strauss, pp. 438-40 Wright, chapters 5-8 | F |
| 6 | June 19 | Luke's Gospel, and his ethics | Strauss, chapters 9, 15; Wright, chapter 9 | Q |
| Quiz 2 should be taken before the end of Sunday. There will be no assignments due the week of June 26, since many students will attend the GCI denominational celebration June 29-July 2. The GCS graduation will be held on June 30. Lessons will be posted on July 3, even though July 4 is a U.S. holiday. In this course, lessons for week 7 will be available on June 26, but no assignments will be due until Thursday, July 6. | | | | |

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|---------------------------------------------------------|---------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---|
| 7 | July 3 | The historical Jesus | Strauss, chapters 11-12, 17-18 | F |
| 8 | July 10 | Gospel of John – why so different? | Strauss, chapters 10, 19-20 | |
| The second paper is due by the end of Sunday. | | | | |
| 9 | July 17 | The theology of John | Wright, chapters 10-13 | F |
| 10 | July 24 | Using the Gospels today: ethics | Strauss, pp. 441-47 Wright, chapters 14-15 | F |
| Quiz 3 should be taken before the end of Sunday. | | | | Q |
| The final paper is due by the end of Sunday, August 13. | | | | |

Appendix A: Course policies

- a) Student code of conduct, including policies about copying work done by someone else -
<https://learn.gcs.edu/mod/page/view.php?id=6471>
- b) Grading policies – descriptions of what it takes to get an A, B, C, etc. <https://learn.gcs.edu/mod/page/view.php?id=6473>
- c) Additional academic policies: auditing, withdrawing, etc. -
<https://learn.gcs.edu/mod/page/view.php?id=6472>
- d) Library resources -
<https://learn.gcs.edu/mod/page/view.php?id=6474>

To contact the instructor: Log in to the class website, and in the right-hand column you will see a section named “Course Contacts.” In that section is the instructor’s name, and under that, two icons. The first is for email; the second is for website messages. Please use the second one to send a message to the instructor (it will not be visible to any other students). We want all class-related communications to be sent through the website, rather than email. This helps us keep an archive of messages.

Late papers: The grade will be reduced 5 percent for each day the papers are late, so only in rare cases it will be worth your while to take an extra day to do a better job. Most GCS students are involved in pastoral work, and emergencies are common in this line of work, so you need to make allowance for the possibility.

Late forum assignments will be penalized 20 percent for each day they are late. The discussions are opportunities to learn, to think about what you are learning, and to apply ideas into your own circumstances. But we cannot have a *discussion* if your comments are late.

Plagiarism is representing the words, ideas, or work of someone else as if they were your own. It does not matter whether this is done intentionally or accidentally. In general, any quote of more than five words in a row should be put within quote marks, and the source noted. It is not

enough to cite the source – the quoted words should be in quote marks. The penalty for plagiarism is a failing grade for the assignment. The penalty for a second infraction is a failure of the entire course.

Class confidentiality: Grades are confidential; we do not report your grades to your employer or to anyone else outside of GCS administration. Materials posted in the class, including lessons and discussion forums, are for class use only. Students are to protect the confidentiality of all classroom materials and should not share any classroom materials without written permission of the person quoted and the instructor.

Course bibliography: The books and resources used for developing this course are listed in a separate document.

Appendix B: Student learning outcomes

GCS Mission: Our mission is to equip men and women for church-based ministry. We accomplish this through quality graduate-level distance education programs in biblical, theological, and pastoral studies grounded in biblical, Christ-centered, historically orthodox faith and worship.

Grace Communion Seminary has five core learning outcomes for its students. This course serves primarily to support the first outcome.

GCS Student Learning Outcome 1: Students will be able to explain the revelation of the Bible in its historical and cultural setting as it relates to God, Jesus Christ and salvation, and its application for faithful living today.

Course Student Learning Outcome 1: List the distinctive teachings of each of the four Gospels, and describe how each contributes to a more complete picture of who Jesus was, and what he said and did.

Lessons

- Week 2: The Gospel of Mark – its structure, features, and its secret
- Week 4: The Gospel of Matthew – the Jewish anti-Jewish Gospel
- Week 6: Luke’s Gospel, and his ethics
- Week 8: Gospel of John – why so different?

Other in-class activities

- Quizzes 1, 2, 3

Assignments

- One textbook has extensive chapters on each Gospel
- One section of exegetical paper #2 requires a discussion of the themes of the Gospel

Course Student Learning Outcome 2: Explain the challenges involved in using the Gospels as sources of historical information, and give a reasoned response to the challenges.

Lessons

- Week 7: The historical Jesus

Other in-class activities

- Quiz 3
- Forum discussion in week 7

Assignments

- One textbook discusses the historical questions

Course Student Learning Outcome 3: Describe scholarly proposals about the literary relationships between the Synoptic Gospels.

Lessons

- Week 1: What is a Gospel? What is the Synoptic Problem?

Other in-class activities

- Quiz 1

Assignments

- One chapter of one required textbook focuses on literary relationships

Course Student Learning Outcome 4: Analyze a passage in the Gospels in light of its historical and literary setting, to describe its message for the original readers.

Instructions

- 16 pages of detailed instructions are given for how to

analyze a passage and write the results

Assignments

- Paper on the historical and literary setting
- Paper on a detailed analysis of the passage
- Paper on its contemporary significance and use

Course Student Learning Outcome 5: Describe the cultural and theological differences between Jesus' circumstances and our own, and explain how his teachings are useful in the church today despite those differences.

Lessons

- Week 3: How do we interpret and use parables?
- Week 5: What is the kingdom of God/heaven?
- Week 9: The theology of John
- Week 10: Using the Gospels today: ethics

Other in-class activities

- Quizzes 2 and 3
- Forum discussion in weeks 3, 5, 9, and 10

Assignments

- Paper 3 requires students to describe how the teachings of a passage in the Gospels can be used today

Appendix C: Instructions for the forum discussion

A good contribution to an online discussion...

1. is on time – generally by the end of Thursday.
2. is relevant to the topic.
3. shows not just opinions, not just facts, but opinions or conclusions based on facts. It shows good logic.
4. shows some connection of the discussion with the world outside of the forum – the lessons, textbooks, or life experience.
5. shows good grammar, and readers can clearly understand what you are saying.
6. stimulates further discussion, either through questions or with ideas that provoke other students to make comments.

A *discussion*, by definition, requires that students respond to what other students have posted. A good response...

1. is on time – by the end of Sunday
2. is in the right place (that is, it is posted as a “reply” instead of being posted as a new topic).
3. adds something to the conversation, building on the initial ideas, showing thought, not just a quick reaction.
4. shows connection with the world outside the forum – in the lessons, textbooks, experience, other GCS classes, etc.

Comments do not need to be *long*. Two medium-length comments are

better than one long one. Think of a classroom: students generally do not want to listen to some other student go on and on for five or ten minutes. Research in online classes at other schools shows that long submissions are less likely to be read, and less likely to be commented on. One paragraph of about ten lines is usually enough.