

Lutheran Foundations: A Confirmation Curriculum©

Year 2. Jesus Christ: His Life and Work

The Tomorrow River Lutheran Parish

Lesson 1. The Basics: The Gospels. October 1, 2025

Quick Review: The Bible

For Lutherans, the Bible is all of the following:

1. The Written Word of God
2. A Book, or more properly, a collection of books, to be read using ordinary literary rules (genre, setting, context, purpose, tense, redaction, etc.). In addition, we are committed to honoring the plain meaning of words and we seek to understand how the initial writers and readers of any part of the Bible would have understood those words.
3. A Book written in other languages and arising from very different cultures and then translated into English
4. A gift from God
5. A book which points to Christ (The Manger and swaddling clothes which hold Christ -- Luther)
 - a. It is NOT Divine (The Master pointing to the moon...)
 - b. It is NOT to be worshiped
 - c. It is NOT a textbook providing answers for questions of
History
Anthropology
Physics
Biology
Geography

And there are LOTS of translations! Into LOTS of languages!

We are not like our Muslim neighbors for whom the Koran is only the word of God in Arabic. Muslims can have translations of the Koran, but they have to learn Arabic to really read the word of God.

(To be very clear, Christians do not think the Koran is the word of God at all. I only bring it up because we are talking about translations!)

Muslims have to learn the original language. Not so for Christians. We do not make you learn Greek and Hebrew and Aramaic. (Though we still require Lutheran Pastors

to have some familiarity with both Greek and Hebrew... and it would be really cool if you decided to learn Greek!) We care what the original languages say because we want to be certain about our proclamation in English, but we think that the English translation is completely and fully “The written Word of God, the Word of God in the third sense.” (You should know what that means!)

Remember, we don’t think the words themselves are magic. Their power is that they point to Christ! So English works. And French. And Dutch. Just so long as the translation is faithful! Just so long as the words point the reader to Christ!

This year we are going to be living in the NEW TESTAMENT – that’s the 27 books that deal with Jesus, the life of the early church, and the Christian Life. Specifically, we will be living in the GOSPELS, the first four books of the New Testament. Which raises the question:

“What’s a Gospel?”

The word itself means “Good News”. Most commonly it refers to the teaching and revelation of Jesus which is recorded in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Thus, those books are referred to as “Gospels”. In Christian worship services we have “Gospel Lessons” which are BOTH the good news about Jesus and a lesson from one of these four books about Jesus...

Traditionally, we stand when the Gospel is presented in our midst as a sign of deep respect and in awareness that this is the best news ever shared for Humanity and for ourselves...

Societally, the word “Gospel” has broadened out, but it keeps its Christian flavor and the sense of absolute truth.

People will say “I think that’s right, but don’t take it as Gospel...”

Specialists will say “That’s not my opinion, that’s Gospel...”

In many fields, once an idea or process is beyond argument or refinement, once it’s absolutely, incontrovertibly true, “its Gospel”.

And then there is “Gospel Music” which is both about Jesus and full of emotional reaction and resonance to Jesus.

For us, “Gospel” means true! It means the message about Jesus! It means the teachings of Jesus! It means the words and stories that still point us to the living Jesus and awaken faith in us!

What Did Jesus Mean When HE talked about the Gospel?

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Mark 1:14-15 NRSV

Jesus wanted the world to know that the long-awaited reign of God had begun in him and in his presence AND

That those who would follow him should

1. Repent, which literally means “Turn Around”. Stop doing the things you are doing. Stop believing the lies you believe. Stop following paths that lead into the dark. Instead, do what I do, do what I tell you to do!
2. Believe in the good news. Which is BOTH
 - a. Believing in Jesus Himself AND
 - b. Believing in the things Jesus taught and said and did – and letting those beliefs be fully expressed in your life and thoughts and behavior and priorities.

This year we are going to be taking a deep deep dive into the Gospel – and using the four Gospels of the New Testament to guide and shape us. We will be watching Jesus and listening to Jesus and thinking about what it means to follow Jesus

But there are a few other things that you need to know:

“Gospel” Is Also A Literary Genre!

The Gospels contain historical accounts, but they are not written as histories. They were not written using the rules that modern historians use.

MATTHEW starts with a genealogy and then transitions into the story with the words “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way...” Matthew 1:18

MARK tells us that he is giving us “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ” Mark 1:1

LUKE is writing to someone named “Theophilus” – whom we do not know – in order that Theophilus will have the background information to make sense of the teaching (CONFIRMATION CLASSES!!!) that he has received...

1:1 Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed. ⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, ... Luke 1:1-5a

JOHN starts with a glorious hymn to the eternal Christ and then jumps straight into the story of Jesus’ Baptism.

He tells us directly why he has written his Gospel at the end of the 20th chapter – which may have actually been the original end of the book....

20:30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. John 20:30-31

Bottom line: The Gospels were written to help you believe in Jesus – that you might have life in him.

Histories are written to clearly lay down facts, chronologies and cause/effect relationships. They are written so that you might have a correct knowledge and understanding about what happened and why it happened.

Gospels contain history, but they are written to help you believe in Jesus and know Jesus.

That might seem like splitting hairs, but it turns out to be a pretty big difference because...

There Are Differences of Both Fact and Chronology Between the Four Gospels

Sometime in your life, someone will tell you that there are real differences between the four Gospels – and that because there are these differences you can’t trust them. This is nuts. We trust the Gospels as Gospels while knowing full well that there are differences. Real differences. Google can list them for you if you want a list. The

Christian Church has always known this. It isn't a surprise to us! I don't want you to be surprised. I don't want you to think that you have been misled! There are differences. Real differences. If you were reading the Gospels as 4 straight histories, you might despair when they disagree.

Christians who love the Lord and who have studied the Bible don't despair! And each age has had its preferred method of dealing with the discrepancies

In some parts of the ancient church, people were discouraged from reading the Gospel of John until they were 40... old enough to have been well trained in the faith, old enough not to be freaked out.

In the modern church, we have a much worse solution: most of us don't bother to actually read the Gospels closely enough to notice the differences and many of our pastors play a ridiculous game asserting that there are no differences – that the Gospels tell a seamless historical story without any contradictions or disagreement.

I want you to know the truth. I want you to understand that the Gospels were not written with modern historical sensibilities. Each of them was written to help some specific group or person HEAR the good news and BELIEVE the good news. Together they give us four unique witnesses to the good news of Jesus.

Maybe think of it this way: Each of the writers had access to the story of Jesus' life and to a whole bunch of Jesus' teachings and miracles and parables. Let's call all of that stuff "TRUE YARN". Then each of the writers took that TRUE YARN, and only that TRUE YARN, and wove a story for a specific time and place. The weavings will have a great deal of similarity because they are all woven with TRUE YARN, but there will also be real differences in the final products. Each finished product will bear the fingerprints of the specific weaver. Each finished product will be woven for a different group or time... This is just the way it is... right? Nothing to get freaked out about!

And then the really cool, really fun, next step is to try to figure out why each weaver wove as he did! What are each of them trying to show us about Jesus and about following Jesus? This is the work of a lifetime!

Suddenly what was presented to you as a problem becomes an adventure – and it resembles more and more how families talk about powerful moments in their histories. A few details may vary. A few things may be presented in a different chronological order. But the whole family knows the story, knows that the story is central in their shared life, relates to and refers back to the story, and is united around the story. "This happened to us. This story has shaped us and made us who we are – as individuals and as a family."

Don't be afraid. Live in the Truth. See what you see. Its ok! Its good!

Nuts and Bolts

We have no idea who wrote any of these Gospels. Their names are traditional, but those names may or may not have anything to do with the actual authors.

Mark was written first, maybe 30 years after Jesus died and rose again

Matthew and Luke ABSOLUTELY had Mark in front of them when they wrote their Gospels a few years later. Hundreds of verses from Mark show up virtually unchanged in Matthew and Luke. They also had another common source. Hundreds of verses are in both Matthew and Luke that are NOT in Mark. We do not have this missing source. We only have its echoes in Matthew and Luke. The Germans figured this out first so they got to name the missing source. Being practical they called it "Quella", the German word for "Source". We just call it Q.

So Matthew and Luke each had some of their own TRUE YARN, and they each had Mark and Q.

Together these 3 Gospels are called the "Synoptic Gospels". Synoptic means "Seen Together". These three have a similar (but not identical) account of Jesus' earthly life, miracles and teachings.

They are often studied together to get a deeper understanding of Jesus from different perspectives. Think of 3 master painters each painting a portrait of the same subject at roughly the same time. Together there would be a fullness impossible for any one of them!

John was written last, maybe 70 years after Jesus died and rose. John differs from the synoptics in several ways. It has a different chronology and a much more developed sense of Jesus' divinity.

We will be dipping in and out of all four Gospels in our lessons. You will be reading each of the four Gospels twice in their entirety.

Be Brave. Be Curious.

The point of this year is the same as the point of the Gospels: those of us who love you want you to see Jesus. We want you to trust Jesus. We want you to love Jesus.

That is the path of life!