

New Testament Literature - Gospel Themes and Introduction to Acts

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson | **Session** 12

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson concludes his analysis of the four Gospels by synthesizing their unique, complementary portraits of Jesus rather than combining them into a single harmonized narrative. He highlights key cross-Gospel themes, emphasizing Jesus's full humanity (countering early Docetic tendencies), His concern for social outcasts, His teachings on material stewardship, and His establishment of a new community centered on obedience and grace. The session then introduces the book of Acts as a theological bridge showing how Christ's ministry continues through His followers in direct fulfillment of Isaiah's Old Testament restoration promises. Finally, Dr. Mathewson provides administrative guidance and study strategies for the upcoming first exam on New Testament background and Gospel themes.

Outline

I. Introduction and Overview of Session 12

A. Scope of the Session

1. Synthesizing Gospel themes to conclude the Gospel unit.
2. Introducing the canonical role and purpose of the book of Acts.
3. Conducting an administrative and study review for Exam 1.

B. Coverage Boundary for Exam 1

1. Included: All background history, culture, and Gospel lecture material from day one.
2. Excluded: Today's introductory material on the book of Acts (reserved for Exam 2).

C. Course Logistics and Opening

1. Lecture scheduled to conclude 15-20 minutes early to allow for an open Q&A review session.
2. Opening prayer for focus on New Testament revelation and practical response to Christ.

II. Synthesis and Distinct Themes of the Four Gospels

A. The Church's Canonical Decision on the Gospels

1. Preservation of four distinct Gospels rather than a single harmonized biography.
2. Critique of 'Life of Christ' harmonization risks: Threatens to blunt individual theological voices.
3. Historical precedent of Tatian's Diatessaron (2nd century):

- a. Wove all four Gospels starting with John into one continuous narrative.
- b. Rejected by the early Church in favor of maintaining four complementary, distinct voices.

B. Unique Perspectives of the Four Evangelists

- 1. Matthew: Jesus as the New Moses, authoritative teacher, Son of God, Davidic King, and climax of Old Testament Scripture for Jews and Gentiles.
- 2. Mark: Balanced depiction of deity and humanity; Jesus as the suffering servant who dies for His people.
- 3. Luke: Jesus as Savior, Son of David, and compassionate champion of social outcasts and untouchables.
- 4. John: Jesus as the Passover Lamb, eternal Word (logos), and divine Son of God in human flesh.

C. Five Core Cross-Gospel Portraits of Jesus

- 1. Jesus's Full Humanity (Avoiding a Docetic Jesus):
 - a. Definition of Docetism (from Greek dokeo - 'to seem/appear'): Early heresy asserting Jesus only appeared human.
 - b. Biblical evidence of humanity: Growth in wisdom and stature (Luke 2), ignorance of return timing (Mark 13), agony in Gethsemane (Luke 22).
 - c. Theological necessity: Required for Christ to serve as high priest who sympathizes with human temptation (Hebrews).
 - d. Critique of modern docetic tendencies: Halos, glowing depictions, and lyrics like 'no crying he makes'.
- 2. Jesus's Concern for Outcasts (Avoiding a Popular/Elite Jesus):
 - a. Direct engagement with tax collectors, sinners, and ceremonial outcasts despite religious taboos.
- 3. Jesus's Concern for Stewardship (Avoiding a Wealthy Jesus):
 - a. Warnings against hoarding wealth and trusting temporary material possessions (Sermon on the Mount).
- 4. Jesus's Concern for Community (Avoiding an Individualistic Jesus):
 - a. Selection of the 12 Apostles representing the 12 tribes of the new Israel/people of God.
 - b. Redefinition of the assembly (ekklesia) based on faith and obedience to Christ rather than ethnic lineage, Mosaic law, or temple ritual.
 - c. Equal inclusion of Gentiles into the covenant community on the basis of faith.
- 5. Jesus's Offer of Grace (Avoiding a Legalistic Jesus):
 - a. Provision of divine grace and spiritual capacity to fulfill Christ's kingdom demands (Beatitudes, Matthew 5).

III. Introduction to the Book of Acts

A. Canonical Position and Structural Function

- 1. Positioned logically after the Gospels and before the New Testament Epistles.

2. Records how the ministry Jesus began on earth continues through His spirit-empowered followers.

3. Originally part two of a unified two-volume historical work (Luke-Acts).

4. Serves as a narrative bridge to Paul's epistles by introducing major apostolic leaders.

B. Programmatic Structure and Old Testament Fulfillment (Acts 1:8)

1. Geographical expansion outline: Jerusalem -> Judea -> Samaria -> Ends of the Earth.

2. Direct fulfillment of Isaiah's Old Testament restoration prophecy:

a. Outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 32:15 / Acts 1:8).

b. Servant community called as 'my witnesses' (Isaiah 43:10-12 / Acts 1:8).

c. Mission as a light to the nations extending salvation to the 'ends of the earth' (Isaiah 49:6 / Acts 1:8).

3. Transition of Israel's prophetic restoration mandate to the new assembly centered in Jesus.

IV. Administrative Guidance and Exam 1 Preparation

A. Exam Format and Scope

1. Format: Entirely multiple-choice questions designed for completion within one hour.

2. Scope: Covers background history, culture, and Gospel lectures; excludes Acts.

3. Focus: Synthesis, comparison, and contrast of Gospel themes rather than memorizing dates or verse citations.

B. Recommended Study Strategies

1. Comparative Matrix/Chart: Map out Gospels across author, structure, key passages, portraits of Jesus, and core emphases.

2. Historical Review: Know major political/religious figures, Jewish sects (Pharisees, Essenes, Qumran), and canon criteria.

3. Utilize the official Study Guide for Exam 1 available on Blackboard.